

Freedom of Expression and Human Rights

Ted Wood

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Good morning! This morning's story is for each and everyone of us. Say something! The world needs our voice. Everyone has something to say. We need to find our voice and say something.

Finding our voice is not always easy, especially if we live in an environment that suppresses our freedom of expression. When we are young, we learn from those around us and our ability to say what we think often depends on our environment: family, school, government, and social norms. When I was young, I learned to fit into the path of family, community and friends and generally to not rock the boat and to not have too many ideas of my own.

Then the sixties happened.

I was a teenager in the sixties. It was a time in North America of civil rights movements including the right of all people to equality whether the issue was racial discrimination, language rights, women's rights or other rights. And there were the assassinations of political leaders and activists both in Canada and the United States. It was a time of great turmoil but also a time when many people found their voices. It was a time when the right to freedom of expression was necessary to make change but also a time when those in power fought that change.

Today is a day when we celebrate human rights, something that is near and dear to our UU principles, whether it is:

- Through our free and responsible search for truth and meaning,
- Upholding justice, equity and compassion in human relations,
- Recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, or
- The right of conscience within our congregation and in society at large.

The UU principles intersect and connect with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was signed on December 10, 1948.

Human rights are Universal in that they apply to all people everywhere. The declaration is a roadmap for freedom and equality. Countries agreed on the freedoms and rights that deserve universal protection so everyone can live freely, equally, and in dignity.

There are 30 rights and freedoms set out in the declaration including the right to be free from torture, the right to freedom of expression, the right to education and the right to asylum. The declaration includes civil and political rights, such as rights to life, liberty and

privacy. It also includes economic, social and cultural rights such as rights to social security, health and adequate housing.

Today there are many human rights organizations throughout the world. Amnesty International is one of them. It was founded in 1961 and today it is a global movement of over 10 million people that work together to protect and promote human rights. Through Amnesty's research it provides reliable and accurate information on human rights violations and through Amnesty's action network it fights injustice with the goal of ensuring rights are respected for everyone, everywhere.

Just this week Amnesty issued its report on Gaza after collecting and analyzing evidence for many months. Its conclusion is that genocide by Israelis against Palestinians is taking place. Amnesty also condemns the atrocities committed by Hamas and other Palestinian groups on October 7, 2023, calling for all civilian hostages to be released unconditionally and for Hamas and the other Palestinian armed groups responsible for the crimes committed on October 7 to be held to account.

Amnesty is also calling for the UN Security Council to impose targeted sanctions against Israeli and Hamas officials most implicated in crimes under international law.

Whether you agree or disagree with Amnesty's conclusion I suggest you read Amnesty's summary report or its 300-page full report, both of which are available on Amnesty's website at [amnesty.ca](https://www.amnesty.ca).

To live in a free and democratic society is essential to preserve and promote rights. The right to freedom of expression is key to upholding rights and to living a whole life. Freedom of expression unlocks the creativity in each person for the benefit of all.

Freedom of expression is the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. It is the freedom to express opinions as long as they do not incite hatred or violence.

Freedom of expression is essential for the ability to participate in public affairs and to vote. It allows journalists and civil society to serve as a check and balance in public affairs. And freedom of expression is crucial to assert and defend rights. It is essential for freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and protest.

On the anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, Amnesty International celebrates and promotes human rights through the Write for Rights, the world's largest human rights campaign. Nine cases of abuse of rights have been chosen and hundreds of thousands of activists in more than 200 countries unite to campaign on behalf of these prisoners and human rights defenders.

One of the actions this year is the case of political activist Maryia Kalesnikava. She challenged the repressive Belarus government. On September 7, 2020, Maryia was

abducted by the Belarus authorities, detained, and later sentenced to 11 years in prison on false charges. Maryia's family haven't heard from her for over a year.

Maryia Kalesnikava is a professional musician who has filled her life with music and art. She's passionate about meeting people and learning from them, and dreams of a Belarus where everyone is respected and allowed to speak freely.

During the 2020 presidential elections all the leading male candidates due to run against President Lukashenka were jailed or forced to flee the country and so Maryia joined the campaign of independent presidential candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

The election was widely believed to have been rigged and President Lukashenka was returned for his sixth term. Following the election, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced into exile and Maryia emerged as the highest profile opposition figure. She stood at the front line of peaceful protests, confronting abusive police officers, and making a heart-shaped symbol with her hands in front of riot police.

On September 7, 2020, Maryia was abducted by the Belarus authorities. She was taken to the border where she was intimidated and pressured to leave the country. She escaped and tore up her passport to resist deportation. Maryia was arrested, detained, and later sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges including "undermining national security" and "extremism".

Maryia is imprisoned in appalling conditions and has limited access to the healthcare she needs. She is denied any communication with her family and is isolated from other inmates inside the prison.

Maryia has been imprisoned simply for exercising her right to freedom of expression and association, speaking out against arbitrary arrests and abuses of the electoral process during the widely disputed presidential election. Amnesty's petitions and letters demand that Maryia be immediately released from prison, and that her unjust conviction be overturned.

The link to this case and the other Write for Rights cases can be found in First Light.

One thing that I am often asked, is whether writing letters leads to good outcomes. There are many wonderful, good news stories that attest to the positive results from letters, emails and petitions to governments and other authorities.

American singer-songwriter and Amnesty supporter John Legend states: "Real letters can bring hope to people in the direst of situations. When letters arrive in huge numbers, they are also an unmistakable reminder to prison authorities and others that the world is watching."

The following are some of the good news stories resulting from action by Amnesty International and others:

On September 30, 2024, Palestinian surgeon Khaled Al Serr was released from Israeli detention. On March 25, 2024, the Israeli military had detained Dr. Khaled Al Serr during a raid on Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip. Several other medical staff were also detained. After the arrest, Dr. Al Serr's whereabouts remained unknown for over three months. He spent over six months in prison without charges or trial, until his release.

In August 2024, the Houthi authorities in Yemen released four Baha'i individuals who had been detained for over a year. The released individuals had been held at a Houthi-run security and intelligence center in Sana'a. The Houthi armed forces arrested them, along with 13 other Baha'is, on May 25, 2023. For about four months, they were subjected to enforced disappearance. Throughout their detention, they were held without charges and denied access to legal counsel.

Burundian journalist Floriane Irangabiye received a presidential pardon on August 14, 2024 and was released from prison two days later. Irangabiye had been serving a 10-year sentence after being charged for "threatening the integrity of the national territory." This stemmed from comments she made on an online radio show in August 2022.

On April 5, 2024 Zimbabwean authorities dismissed the "malicious damage to property" charges against six University of Zimbabwe students. They were previously detained and charged after participating in a peaceful protest in Harare on May 15, 2023. They were calling for an end to the persecution of opposition leaders and the release of Citizens' Coalition for Change parliament member, Job Sikhala. They were charged with "malicious damage to property" because similar calls were spray-painted on government buildings the next day. However, no evidence connected them to the graffiti.

Narges Mohammadi is free from Iran's infamous Evin prison after facing a 16-year sentence for her peaceful activism, most notably in support of women's rights and gender equality, and against the death penalty. Her health had been declining but she was denied adequate health care. Thanks to support from you and others around the world, including during our 2016 Write for Rights campaign, Narges was finally released and reunited with her family. She can now access the medical treatment she needs.

These are some of the Good News stories resulting from actions taken by Amnesty supporters and other human rights defenders.

Last year during Write for Rights, Amnesty activists took 4.6 million actions, and Amnesty members hosted events in more than 200 countries, including 210 events in Canada. Together, we wrote millions of letters, emails, and tweets and signed petitions.

With the postal strike here in Canada, letters can be sent by email and tweets and petitions can be signed online. All the information to take part is included on the Write for Rights website including tips for writing letters.

If you have a little bit of time, you can sign the petitions on each of this year's cases. If you have more time, you can send a letter and sample letters are provided to assist you. All the information you need is on the Write for Rights website. The link to the website is in First Light.

If you wish to support Amnesty's ongoing work, you can donate to Amnesty on First's Canada Helps donation page by selecting the Amnesty International option in the dropdown menu.

In today's world situation, defence of human rights is greatly needed. To my way of thinking, human rights will always need defending in order to defend democracy and to defend and strengthen an equitable society where all people are able to speak freely, live freely, gather freely, and live in a free and supportive community and society. Where we can all Say Something and be our best creative selves.