

“You Can’t Drown the Fire”

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Unity Church–Unitarian

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SERMON: You Can’t Drown the Fire – Janne Eller-Isaacs

There are so many people to name. So many lives that have been disrupted that I can’t begin to communicate their plight adequately. But how else do I bring the reality of their lives into this room? There is Fernando Garavito, a well known journalist and professor of journalism in Bogota, Colombia who dared to speak out against the drug cartels and witnessed in his work to the wasted human lives lost to murder; the best and the brightest, the promise of his country’s future. Fernando Garavito was forced into exile as the death squads came closer and closer. He currently lives in New Mexico. His work, including his columns, is banned in Colombia.

There is Zeina Ghandour, a Palestinian woman who grew up in exile in the refugee camps of Lebanon. She still lives in exile in England, a victim of the war in Lebanon and the violence in the Middle East. There is Fatima, a young seven-year-old girl exiled with her family from Afghanistan. Fatima spent the majority of her life in refugee camps in Pakistan. She has recently returned to her neighborhood. It was destroyed by the latest war. All her relatives who remained were lost. There is Mercedes Sosa, an Argentinean singer exiled for speaking her mind. There is Kobe, an eight-year-old Rwandan boy forced into exile when his parents were killed. The rest of his relatives were subsequently killed and he was left alone to find sanctuary with other war orphans who walked together to the nearest refugee camp. There is a Croatian woman named Nada, which means hope in Serbo-Croatian, who was exiled from her integrated neighborhood in Sarajevo when it was invaded. She was a professional cellist and couldn’t find work during the years of the war. There is Song Thao, our financial assistant here at Unity who with her extended family, walked for months through war ravaged lands to escape the horror and violence in Laos. They walked when Song was between the ages of three and four with a crippled grandmother to Thailand. She remembers crossing the river as bullets blazed above her head and all around her, landing in the water nearby.

There are people all over the globe that have been forced from their homes, torn from all that is familiar.

Some of them have actively defied the governments of their homelands, speaking out against fascism, dictatorships, or repressive policies. Some of them have been helpless victims of war and violence. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: they have been forced from their homelands. For centuries, immigrants have come to this country pursuing the promise of a better life. It is the heritage of most of us here. But now the cause of people seeking a new home in foreign lands is much more likely to be the result of war and violence. These people have been tragically wrenched from their homes. They come seeking a peaceful life where they can begin again.

I want to put this into context for you. In World War I, 95% of all casualties were combatants and 5% were civilians. In today’s wars, the figures are reversed: 95% of all casualties are civilians and 5% combatants. Wars are no longer fought on a distant front, but in populated neighborhoods that destroy communities, homes and lives.

As a result of this tragic change in war tactics, the numbers of refugees and exiles have swollen from 2.5 million in 1970 to over 23 million today. It wasn’t until the twentieth century when social and political upheavals created waves of displaced people. Despite these statistics, popular opinion has largely turned against refugees and exiles. For example, European countries and the United States have erected new barriers to refugees and exiles, issued new visa requirements and built new border crossings. Xenophobia, fear of the other or stranger has intensified all over the developed world and few countries have done anything to stem the tide of ignorance, suspicion and fear.

The predicament of exiles and refugees is an increasing issue around the globe and given the reality of war and displacement it is likely only to get worse. We are all aware that Hmong exiles who have spent years in refugee camps have been and will be arriving in our metropolitan area in the coming weeks. Their stories joins those around the globe

who have lost their homeland and who must now cope with life in a new country with its strange culture, language, and – in our case – climate.

Charles Connell divides exiles into three categories: those banished from their native countries by sovereign authorities, those compelled to leave by force of circumstances, and those who voluntarily leave, seeking abroad what can not be provided by their homelands. The first face exile as punishment, the second chose it over fear, violence and economic devastation, the third self-imposed exile. They all experience homesickness.

Losing one's homeland brings about feelings of disorientation, alienation, psychological and spiritual discomfort and pain. I know that those of you in the room who work with public health and social service agencies are well aware of the trauma associated with displacement.

Edward Said wrote often about the dynamics of exile. In an essay entitled *The Mind of Winter*, he characterized exile "as the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home." As forced exile is becoming more and more a fact of our global community, the dynamics of exile and displacement are more a fact in our daily encounters and our collective consciousness.

If many of the exiled and displaced refugees eventually find a home in a host country and assimilate into its intellectual and cultural life, it is not without experiencing the trauma of losing reassuring ties to their homeland. They have tasted the bitter bread of this terrible thing called exile. Some find new strength and vigor in the bitter bread, while others can not find nourishment from it.

During the immigration of the Hmong here in the Twin Cities and in other parts of the country, a tragic phenomenon occurred. Healthy men in the prime of life died in their sleep. No medical explanation could be found. No cause of death was ever discovered. But the Hmong knew – the souls of the deceased had never found a home here and had returned to their homeland creating bodily death. Song's uncle died this way in the early years of their transition to life here. Of all of Song's relatives, he had the most difficult time adjusting to life here. It was painful for the family but not a surprise. The rest of her family has created successful and meaningful lives here. They look forward to their community welcoming those arriving, but worry that this soul wandering death might continue. As with many of the refugees here, Song and her relatives have found a balance between the preservation of their traditions and the embrace of their new life. This is one of the primary challenges that every exile faces.

"We are all born into a history, but exiles torn from their homes and cast out of their histories, are forced into a thorny new path." As one writer on exile put it, "They all come to the same realization: that all people are kin even if we kill each other. We all lie in the same grave." They have all had to face the reality of the final democracy. We are all given one precious life and all, no matter what their station must face death at some time. To survive and flourish, each displaced person must learn hard often-brutal lessons of life. But once learned, their lives are often deepened and enriched.

As Buddhist teacher and exile Thich Nhat Hanh, who was exiled from his homeland of Vietnam, says, "I know I can not go home. This was very difficult for me to accept for a long time. But then as I traveled, I began to realize that I must carry home with me wherever I go. Once I realized that, then I felt at home anywhere in the world."

Why is this the theme for the time leading up to Easter here at Unity? What were we thinking when the ministers and Worship Associates began to discuss this idea?

The numbers of exiled people entering our communities has increased dramatically over the last few decades and yet the story of exile is as ancient as the beginning of human community. It is expressed in the most ancient of stories and myths and is embedded in human consciousness. According to Edward Said, "Modern exile is irredeemably secular and unbearably historical. It has become a metaphor for our time." I would add that it is unquestionably religious.

We have all experienced exile some time in our lives. We have all been refugees, if only for a moment. Remember that feeling of loneliness, as if a child uprooted from all things known and unknown, of cosmic displacement, as if an alien in a foreign land?

We have all known moments of exile, times when we lose that which anchors us to what is familiar and predictable: people facing disease and illness feel exiled from their own bodies; newly separated partners feel exiled from

relationships, family and communities; people who grieve over the death of a loved one feel exiled from their familiar life; abused children and youth feel exiled from a safe and secure life; political conservatives feel exiled in liberal religious congregations where assumptions are made that exclude rather than include; gay and lesbians are exiled from communities and families when they courageously speak the truth of who they are; disappointment and failure propel us into momentary states of exile. Depression and despair cast us out from a life that provides joy and satisfaction. These are more psychological and spiritual than physical, but they are experiences of exile and displacement nonetheless. Memories of these times create bridges of compassion to others that are experiencing their own kind of exile.

Religious liberals often have lived the story of exile: as they found the religious traditions and dogma of their childhood upbringing to be foreign and alien. My colleague Victoria Safford in an essay in the *UU World* argues that exile is part of our collective memory and history. "Unitarian Universalist history is the story of those who could not with integrity abide certain beliefs or imposed religious practice. Many have faced exile, separation from their own hearts, their own conscience and their own God."

The contemporary philosopher and Polish expatriate Leszek Kowalowski wrote, "Any exile can be seen either as a misfortune or as a challenge... We have to accept the simple fact that we are living among refugees, nomads roaming about the continents and warming their souls with the memory of their homes. Exile is the permanent human condition."

Our religious ancestors were strengthened by their times of exile and were inspired to put down roots in a new faith. They were fortified by a journey that began with doubt and questioning and led them to leave the religion of their past. As religious exiles, they turned away from that which was familiar and sought something that better resonated with their beliefs. Courageously they sought to find a faith that spoke to who they truly were and who they were becoming. The same is true for many of you. The same is true for the people around us moving into our neighborhoods and communities. They come with their courage, vision, hope, homesickness and vulnerability. They come with their stories and traditions. They come with battered but resilient and fiery spirits. Just as we have learned when we have come out of times of exile, they come with their wisdom and insight to share.

They are the people who have survived the arduous and demanding task of leaving home and putting down roots in a new, often foreign home. They come because the fire of their spirit will not be put out. They survive and thrive. They survive and thrive in the names of those that didn't. May we create bridges to them with our compassionate understanding of what it is to come out of exile. May we welcome them with open hearts and minds.