

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday December 2nd 2018

Reading: “Ely Rosales”

For decades, “Guest at Your Table” has been introducing Unitarian Universalists to real people impacted by human rights issues and to grassroots leaders making a difference around the world. This year, the UU Service Committee’s theme is “Justice Across Borders”, with four stories that provide a personal glimpse into the lives of Central Americans making the perilous journey north in hope of finding refuge in the United States. Each Sunday in Advent, we’ll meet one of the “guests” whose lives have been changed because of the generosity of Unitarian Universalists like us, and, in turn, their stories will be an inspiration to us. Today’s guest is Ely Rosales.

In Honduras, speaking out against injustice is an enormous risk. Human rights workers, activists and journalists face sabotage, property damage, death threats, beatings and worse.

Ely Rosales knows the dangers of working for human rights in Honduras, but he chooses to do it anyway. Ely works for one of UUSC’s partners in Honduras, a radio station called Radio Progreso, which provides a rare independent media space amid waves of propaganda in favor of President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Ever since the November 2017 re-election of Hernández, the reasons to speak out have increased — and so have the dangers. Although the Honduran Constitution clearly states that presidential reelection is prohibited and cannot be amended (and amendments are to be made by the Congress), Hernández made his way onto the ballot after a controversial Supreme Court ruling during his first term.

On top of this ruling, Hernández’s victory on election day — marred by suspiciously timed black-outs of polling stations — was widely viewed as fraudulent. Since then, protests in the streets have been met with deadly military crackdowns. Over thirty people have been killed by police.

Reaching over 700,000 listeners daily, Radio Progreso covers a wide range of topics, from politics to environmental issues, as well as a weekly feminist talk show. Ely explains, “We open the media space to the people in order for them to express their ideas and opinions about what is happening in our country.”

Due to their candid reporting on the election and police repression, Ely explains, “We suffer many threats from the government.” In one recent and costly case of sabotage, one of Radio Progreso’s transmission towers was knocked down in the middle of the night.

In the face of such immense challenges, Radio Progreso has not been deterred and has even increased their outreach efforts since the election. With the UU Service Committee’s support, they continue to broadcast daily and share news about the political unrest in Honduras with US media outlets.

In addition, Ely and Padre Melo, the founder and director of Radio Progreso, recently testified before the US House of Representatives’ Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights.

Buoyed by the presence of others working for human rights — whom he calls “social fighters” — Ely maintains a strong feeling of promise for the future. He explains, “We are full of hope. We are in this because we believe we can find some way to get better conditions in our country for the majority.”

Sermon: “Sharing Hope”

I had a professor in seminary who quite proudly told us that he had no hope. Miguel de la Torre’s hopelessness: hope gets in the way of action — attachment to results can be a barrier to achieving those results, and risks disappointment; hope can be used to oppress. Some group of people (colonizers, a church hierarchy) are the cause of suffering, and yet they offer their victims false hope by telling them that they’ll be rewarded in heaven. De la Torre describes hope as “a middle-class privilege” that “soothes the conscience of those complicit in oppressive structures [of power], lulling them to do nothing except look forward to a salvific future where every wrong will be righted.”

There was also the problem of justice for the Universalists. The Universalists believed that everyone went to heaven, because God’s love was so great that everyone would be saved. And yet, if everyone ends up in heaven, regardless of how they behaved during life, then where’s the justice for the victims of suffering if those who had done terrible things to them ended up right alongside them in heaven? The hope of universal

salvation was a much needed antidote to the fear experienced by people who were genuinely trying to live good lives but were worried they might not be good enough to be saved, but it needs to be more than just “fingers crossed, it’ll all be good”.

There is, in fact, a difference between hope and optimism, and there’s a story I like to tell that illustrates this.

There were two twin brothers, but they differed in a significant way. One of the brothers was a pessimist and the other was an optimist. Their birthday was coming up, and their parents promised them a big surprise. The day came and their parents took the brothers to the garage, where they threw open the door to reveal a huge, steaming pile of manure. The brother who was a pessimist fell to his knees and said “Oh no! I knew that this was going to happen! Birthdays are terrible and this one is no different!” The brother who was an optimist, on the other hand, simply dived head first into the manure. The pessimist couldn’t believe it and was so surprised that he broke from his usual litany of grievances. He said, “Are you crazy? What do you think you’re doing?” And the optimist replied, “With all this manure, there’s just got to be a pony in here somewhere!”

It’s easy to recognize that wallowing in self-pity doesn’t change anything and doesn’t do us any good, but neither does diving into the manure to look for a pony.

The story doesn’t end there, though, for the brothers had a sister, and her name was Hope. She found a shovel and a wheelbarrow and she organized her brothers to go around their neighborhood selling the manure for people’s gardens. It took a while to sell it all, but then, with the proceeds, they bought themselves a pony.

As opposed to pessimism — which is assuming that everything will go wrong regardless — and in contrast to optimism — which is assuming that everything will go right all by itself — hope is about action. Hope is not “fingers crossed, it’ll all be good”. Rather, hope is about assessing the situation, coming up with a plan, and doing something about it.

The four “Stories of Hope” that the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee compiles every year, then, are not intended as “feel good” stories to help us pretend that the world is a happy place and anything bad is just a matter of misunderstanding and

everything will just magically work out in the end, like a Disney movie. There are realities in these stories that may be harsh for those of us who are privileged to see much of the world through rose-colored glasses. Some of the stories are set in violent places, where people have been victimized, threatened or even killed. These are not “stories of optimism”.

They are stories of hope because they are about people taking action in the face of harsh realities. They are stories of people bringing hope to life in their actions. As we heard in the story of Ely Rosales, ...

So yes, we need some good news from time to time, but the best cure for feeling scared or disheartened is to do something about it, especially if we’re doing it with other people.

Back in the Spring, my daughter and my father were sick at the same time. Olivia had a fever of 104, though you wouldn’t have known it by the way she was behaving. Still, when a child is sick, the parents worry, especially with a fever that high. My father had what was otherwise a cold, but at his age and with other health problems, including breathing difficulties, it was really serious. He couldn’t speak to me because he was too weak, and I could tell my mother was really worried about him.

It was a Sunday when all this happened, so Allison and I took Olivia to CHKD Urgent Care, where she was examined, and her throat was swabbed, and she was diagnosed with strep, and we got a prescription for antibiotics. We were still concerned, but we had done something about it, and we had found help, and now we had a plan to move forward.

There wasn’t any such thing I could do for my father. My parents live in England, and I stayed in touch with my mother and my sister, and I was glad of their updates about my father’s condition, but I continued to be much more anxious about him than I was about Olivia.

The best cure for feeling scared or disheartened is to do something about it, not to pretend that it’s all under control and everything will be fine, but precisely because we have engaged with it, so we’re no longer passive by-standers.

Let's face it, there are lots of terrible things happening in the world, and pretending they're not or pretending that everything will somehow work out okay is foolishness. Just to take one small selection of terrible things, consider the demonization of immigrants, the separation of families, the literal caging of children, the use of fear to manipulate public opinion, and, just a week ago, the pepper-spraying of children. Of course, neither pessimism nor optimism are answers. Rather, hope, taking action, is the answer.

That's why, given these events, the UU Service Committee chose "Justice Across Borders" as the theme for their "Guest at Your Table" fund-raising campaign. As they explain it, "For thousands of Central Americans making the dangerous journey north to escape gang violence, gender-based assault, and increased militarization, the road away from danger is paved with injustices." The UU Service Committee "recogniz[es] the difficulty and duration of this journey — and believ[es] that human rights should be recognized before, during, and afterward".

The Service Committee has been putting such convictions into practice for almost eighty years, going back to World War Two and the hope they brought to people trying to escape Nazi-occupied Europe. As a human rights organization grounded in Unitarian Universalist values, the Service Committee is committed to advancing human rights, dismantling systems of oppression, and uplifting and affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people. They do that by centering the lived experiences and hard-won wisdom of communities on the front line, partnering with grassroots groups around the world to support those facing human rights abuses, humanitarian crises, and displacement due to climate change.

Through "Guest at Your Table", we have the opportunity to support the UU Service Committee's work, to join them in their advocacy efforts, and to spread Unitarian Universalist values not as abstract ideas but as recipes for action for a better world.

Unitarian Universalists embrace hope, but with a good dose of realism, and recognizing that it must be justified by action. The UU Service Committee's "Stories of Hope" may well describe grim realities, and yet the people in these stories are not giving up. They're not deluding themselves that everything will simply turn out the right way;

rather, they're working to make that happen, recognizing that it might not happen for some time, but knowing that it's doing the work that matters, that brings hope to life.

As journalist and activist Dorothy Day put it, "People ask, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do." May we always know this to be true.