

## Human Rights in a UU Context

Service presented by Carl Tichler, October 1, 2006  
Guest Speaker, Saba Quraishi

Opening Words

### Lions in the Cage

by Ustad Badruzzaman Badr

In the name of Allah, the Benificent, the Most Merciful  
a poem by Ustad Badruzzaman Badr  
written in Camp Delta, Guantanamo, Cuba

*We are heroes of the time  
We are the proud youth  
We are the hairy lions*

*We live in the stories now  
We live in the epics  
We live in the public hearts*

*We are the shield before the oppressor  
Our courage is like a mountain  
Pharaoh of the time is restless of us*

*The negligible chief of the white palace  
And many other sinful chiefs  
Cannot see our patience here*

*The whirlpool of our tears  
Is moving fast toward them  
No one can endure the power of this flood*

*Mostly it happens in these cages  
That the stars at midnight  
Are giving good news*

*That we are surely successful  
That the world is waiting for us  
That we are the caravan of Badr*

### Sermon

The author of this poem, Ustad Badruzzaman Badr, was released from Guantanamo last year and returned to Pakistan. He and his brother, Abdurraheem Muslim Dost, were both already poets before arriving at Guantanamo Bay. They wrote thousands of lines of poetry while they were held there, and most of these was confiscated by the military.

For me, the story of Guantanamo is more than just the so-called "extraordinary rendition", where suspected terrorists have been kidnapped by our government and held without trial, in Guantanamo, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. It is more than just the denial of habeas corpus to the detainees. It is even more than the torture and death that has taken place at Guantanamo, Abu Gharaib, Bagram, and elsewhere. For me, Guantanamo is also the story of two brothers taken from their families, held for years without being charged with any crime, who managed to somehow maintain their dignity --- their humanity --- through writing poetry. They understood that they have human rights, even when they have been cruelly denied.

In September of last year, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee sponsored the "Call for Justice Weekend", to draw attention to the practice of torture and the damage it has done, and to categorically condemn it, both here in the United States and elsewhere. I was one of the people from this congregation who attended this moving event. We heard several stories from victims of torture, many of whom were victimized by government security forces in Latin American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Brazil, in the 1970's and 80's. We learned that many of these government security forces were trained in the techniques of violent repression and torture at the School of the

Americas, here in the United States.

Our country is not the only one that abuses human rights --- this unfortunate distinction is shared by many countries around the world. I have left a copy of Amnesty International's 2006 report in the back of the hall. In it you can find documented abuses of human rights in countries around the world, some countries where the situation is improving, and others where it is deteriorating.

This realization that abuses have happened, and will continue to happen, is sobering, but necessary. It requires us to question claims of our elected officials to "trust us" or defer to presumed experience. When we fail to question or be skeptical of those in authority, we are letting them assert that their humanity is more important than ours. We are all human, and we all share the common flaws of being human. Some of us will abuse power when given the opportunity. And some will say no. This is true regardless of our position and circumstance, whether we are elected to political office or behind the bars of Guantanamo.

There has been a growing public awareness in our country of the human rights violations around the world. The horror of the ongoing genocide in Darfur is recognized, but an effective response does not appear to be coming soon, despite the best efforts of humanitarian groups, including Amnesty International, the UUSC, and the religious education classes of our congregation. The social action committee has responded to rising anti-immigrant sentiment and stood in support of the immigrant community here in Danbury. Most recently, several of us marched at yesterday's protest in support of the 11 undocumented day laborers who were rounded up in Danbury. These workers were detained by federal immigration authorities posing as contractors, and they are now in jail in Hartford awaiting possible deportation.

The last few weeks have seen a crescendo of rhetoric regarding the issue of torture, detention and military commissions, and it has led to the rushed passage of a bill in Congress which is supposed to address these issues. This bill defines torture so narrowly, that it condones other abusive behavior that many would also characterize as torture. It also allows anyone categorized as an "enemy combatant" to be "detained" indefinitely without the right to habeas corpus --- that is, imprisoned without being charged with a crime, and without the right to a speedy trial. Who can be designated as enemy combatants? The bill's language is not clear --- but we do know that many of these enemy combatants, Muslim men such as Ustad Badruzzaman Badr, the man whose poetry I read earlier, were never charged with any crime.

The arguments for this law went something like this: "We" (those who torture and imprison without trial) are under attack by an enemy so evil that we cannot afford to give them the rights to trial that we give ourselves. And we must brutalize and terrorize them through torture and humiliation because this is the only way to "stop" them and protect ourselves.

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism is this: to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. So we must condemn this rhetoric of "us" and "them". We need another narrative, one which listens to and values every person. We need to hear the stories of individuals --- not "us" or "them" --- but individuals and their dreams, hopes, and fears, their virtues and their flaws --- to hear their humanity. I am deeply grateful that my friend Saba Quraishi agreed to come and speak here today and tell her story.

[talk by Saba Quraishi]

I mentioned the first principle before Saba spoke --- to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our second principle as Unitarian Universalists is to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. I think it is important that these three words are placed together. We need to work for justice and fairness, but with compassion.

How do we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity and compassion in human relations? With acceptance of the common humanity of all, and the power of a world community working towards cooperation rather than division. Tomorrow, October 2, is not only Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, but also the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. When Gandhi was asked whether he was a Hindu, he replied: "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew."

The more I learn about different cultures and people --- whether histories of nations, the poetry of the prisoners at Guantanamo, or the spiritual journeys of people in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury -- the more I am in awe of all the different paths people have made towards dignity, fulfillment, and self-worth. On March 18, 2003, the night before the start of the war in Iraq, a group of people from this congregation went to the front of Newtown Town Hall --- in the wish for peace. Saba and her family joined us in front of the Town Hall, as did several others. One of the

members of our congregation, Kathleen Green, led us in saying some words of hope. Then we each lit candles, and stood together silently, holding our candles against the darkness around us. Let us continue to stand together as a community against the darkness around us.

So may it be.

Ending Words, from *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*

*Lead Me from Death to Life, from Falsehood to Truth  
Lead Me from Despair to Hope, from Fear to Trust  
Lead Me from Hate to Love, from War to Peace*

*Let Peace Fill Our Heart, Our World, Our Universe.  
Shalom. Salaam. Peace.*