

## What Is Our Covenant With These Times?<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

September 25, 2016

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: The Brave Little Parrot

Retold from Rafe Martin<sup>2</sup>

Once, long ago, in India, they say the Buddha was born as a little parrot. She lived happily in a beautiful forest. But one day without warning, lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and a dead tree burst into flames. Sparks leapt on the wind and soon the forest was ablaze.

"Fire! Fire!" cried the little parrot. "To the river!" Flapping her wings, rising higher and higher, she flew towards the safety of the river's far shore. But as she flew she could see that many animals were trapped, surrounded by the flames below, with no chance of escape. Suddenly a desperate idea, a way to save them, came to her.

She darted to the river, dipped herself in the water, and flew back over the now raging fire. The thick smoke made breathing almost unbearable. Crackling flames leapt up before her. Twisting and turning through the mad maze of fire, the little parrot flew bravely on. At last, when she was over the center of the forest, she shook her wings and released the few drops of water which still clung to her feathers. The tiny drops tumbled down like jewels into the heart of the blaze and vanished with a hissssssssss.

Then the little parrot flew back through the flames and smoke to the river. Once more she dipped herself in the cool water, and flew back over the burning forest, and shook her wings so the few drops of water could fall. Back and forth she flew, time and time again. Her feathers were charred. Her feet were scorched. Her lungs ached. Her eyes, stung by smoke, turned red as coals. But still the little parrot flew on.

At this time, some of the devas—the blissful gods of the sky—were floating overhead in their cloud palaces of ivory and gold. They happened to look down and saw the little parrot flying among the flames. They pointed at her with perfect hands. Between mouthfuls of honeyed foods they exclaimed, "Look at that foolish bird! She's trying to put out a raging forest fire with a few sprinkles of water! How absurd!" And they laughed.

But one of those gods, strangely moved, changed himself into a golden eagle and flew down, down towards the little parrot's fiery path. The little parrot was just nearing the flames again when the great eagle with eyes like molten gold appeared at her side.

"Go back, little bird!" said the eagle in a solemn and majestic voice. "Your task is hopeless! A few drops of water can't put out a forest fire! Cease now and save yourself—before it is too late." But the little parrot continued to fly on through the smoke and flames.

"I don't need a great, shining eagle," coughed the little parrot, "to give me advice like that. My own mother, the dear bird, might have told me such things long ago. Advice! I don't need advice. I just (cough, cough), need someone to help."

---

1 Copyright 2016 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 "The Brave Little Parrot" from Rafe Martin *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Legends and Jataka Tales*, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, ©1990)

And the god who was that great eagle, thought suddenly of his own kind. He could see them high up above, the carefree gods, laughing and talking, while many animals cried out in pain and fear below. And he grew ashamed. Then one single desire was kindled in his heart. "God though I am," he exclaimed, "how I wish I could be just like that brave little parrot, risking all to help!"

Moved by these new feelings, he began to weep. Stream after stream of sparkling tears poured from his eyes. Wave upon wave, they fell, washing down like a torrent of rain upon the fire, upon the forest, upon the animals and upon the little parrot herself.

Where those cooling tears fell, the flames shrank down and died. Smoke still curled from the scorched earth, yet new life was already boldly pushing forth shoots, stems, blossoms and leaves. Green grass pushed up from among still glowing cinders. Where the teardrops sparkled on the parrot's wings, new feathers now grew. Red feathers, green feathers, yellow feathers—such bright colors!

All the animals looked at one another in amazement. They were whole and well. Not one had been harmed. Up above in the clear blue sky they could see their brave friend, the little parrot, looping and soaring in delight. When all hope was gone, somehow she had saved them. "Hurray!" they cried. "Hurray for the brave little parrot and for the miraculous rain!"

### *Sermon*

When you've studied people from history, have you ever wondered what you would do, if faced by the challenges they faced? We hear stories of people who were courageous and bold, who took risks to overcome evil, or help people in trouble. And don't we wish we could be that courageous and bold too?

Waitstill and Martha Sharp are two such courageous heroes, and they are Unitarian heroes, which makes them special for us as Unitarian Universalists. This was back during the 1930s and 40s, before the Unitarians and Universalists joined together into one denomination. It was during the time that the Nazis came to power in Germany, during the time of World War Two.

Rev. Waitstill Sharp was a Unitarian minister serving in Wellesley Massachusetts. His wife Martha had been a social worker before they met, and in what often happened in those days, she served as a kind of second minister at the church, leading youth education and women's groups, and whatever else might help the people. Both of them also did social action work in their community.

One Sunday evening in January of 1939, after a day working at church, they were sitting by the fire with their two young children, Hastings, age 7 and Martha, Junior who was 2. The phone rang. It was Rev. Everett Baker, Waitstill's closest friend and the vice president of the American Unitarian Association.

He asked them if they would be willing to go to Czechoslovakia to help people who were trying to escape Nazi persecution. Baker said, "Waitstill, Martha, I am inviting you to undertake the first intervention against evil by the denomination to be started immediately overseas." Seventeen people had already declined his request, because everyone was afraid that war would be coming soon to Czechoslovakia. It would be dangerous. They would have to leave their two children in the care of close friends. But they said yes.

Of course, back in those days, getting to Europe was a much longer journey. No passenger air travel. Just big ships and trains. On February 4<sup>th</sup> they sailed from New York to London, and arrived in Prague by train on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, where they were met by Rev. Norbert Capek. You may remember him. He was a Unitarian minister in Prague, serving the largest Unitarian church in the world at that time. We talk about him every June during our flower ceremony, because he created the flower ceremony. The church was also the center of much resistance to the Nazis at that time, and eventually Norbert Capek would be killed by the Nazis. But no one yet knew how bad it would get.

When the Sharps arrived they opened an office to help the people who would be in the most danger to get out of the country. Intellectuals, journalists, union leaders, and Jewish people were most at risk. It was complicated because they had to get exit visas, the official documents from the countries they hoped to go to; and to get those they had to arrange for jobs and places to live in those countries. Then, just three weeks after the Sharps arrived, the Nazis invaded and took over the city.

They continued their work getting people out of the country, but much of it had to be done in secret. The Sharps learned how to destroy documents that might incriminate people, and to write in code. They were often followed by German spies, and their offices and hotel room were searched. They had to struggle against the immigrant restrictions in other countries. No country was prepared to take Jewish refugees.

For a time, Waitstill traveled in and out of the country, raising money for the refugees and depositing it in banks in different cities so they could access it along their escape routes. Martha kept working on the refugee cases, and also organized for children to leave for safe countries; she wrote about watching their parents being brave for the children they were sending away, smiling and waving even as they wondered if they would ever see them again. The Sharps were in and out of Prague for several months, until they learned they were about to be arrested, so they left immediately and were able to get back to the U.S.

They went back later to France and Portugal to continue the work. Their efforts saved hundreds of people's lives. As we know, millions of people would be killed by the Nazis before the war was over. There were so many people they couldn't save. But they kept trying to save whomever they could. They never thought of themselves as extraordinary people or heroes. They felt that they did what anyone would do, who saw people in danger. But I think we can say that they were heroes—because they had the moral courage to follow their values even when those values led them into risk and danger.

I thought about the Sharps when I found the story of the brave little parrot. In the story, because of the bravery of one bird, a god is moved to tears and the forest is saved as if by a miracle. Waitstill and Martha Sharp were also fighting against impossible odds. They speak about miracles in their work, too: nearly being caught, and daring escapes, and climbs over mountains. But Martha Sharp put it in a different context. She said, "One can only manage a miracle every so often, but a series of miracles can happen when many people become concerned and are willing to act at the right time."

The Sharps took seriously the interconnection between people, the covenant of care with those who are suffering. The word courage comes from the Latin *cor*, which means heart. According to poet Mark Nepo, the original use of the word courage meant to stand by one's core: if we live from the Center of our heart and values we are able to risk danger, and to face whatever life has to offer.<sup>3</sup> The Sharps' courage came from living true to their core values.

Ken Burns worked with their grandson to create a documentary about their lives, and it is dedicated to the millions of people who did not escape from the Nazis.<sup>4</sup> The Sharps' work did not put out the fire that was raging over Europe in their time. But another miracle happens when people like the Sharps risk everything to help—in the face of the evil that casts a shadow over humanity, their shining light of goodness and compassion gives us a spark of hope.

Rev. Bill Schulz wrote:

“In every situation of incomprehensible terror there are always a few people who have cast their lot with the Honorable and the Just... Such people need not be well-educated or sophisticated or even successful in their witness; they simply need to be those who, in the face of sorrow, choose honor and blessing and life. And when they do, they redeem if not humanity, then at least their generation. ...For if even only one person in a generation or a country or a culture chooses honor and blessing and life—even only one—then it means that anyone could have made that choice; it means that the Radiant had not completely died in those days.”<sup>5</sup>

The Sharps' work was multiplied by the creation of a Unitarian human rights organization, now the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The Service Committee continues to seek out ways to help people who are suffering in the midst of impossible and deadly situations around the world.

That brings me back to the question I asked at the beginning. When you hear the stories of courageous people from history, like the Sharps, do you ever wonder what you would do, if faced by the challenges they faced? And an even more important question—What are the challenges in our own time that require that kind of moral courage and boldness?

On the one hand, we might be more aware of the troubles going on around the world than ever before. We can instantly see photos of bombings in Syria, or a storm flood destroying homes in Baton Rouge. I open my Facebook account and learn about oil spills devastating rivers, or a black man being killed by police after his car breaks down. But sometimes all this knowledge can feel overwhelming. How do we decide when and where to give help? How can one person make a difference?

I want to tell you one story about people who are acting with moral courage in our time. I imagine that many of you have heard about the refugees fleeing the war and bombing in Syria. Over ten million people have been displaced, either in Syria itself, or into nearby countries. Over a million people are seeking asylum in Europe. They have traveled over mountains or across the Mediterranean Sea in tiny boats trying to escape the war and destruction. Many have died along the way, but staying home is even more dangerous than fleeing.

---

3 From Erika Hewitt, *Bold and Courageous Together* at <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalichelighting/boldand-courageoustogether>

4 Ken Burns and Artemis Joukowsky, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*.

5 “Too Swift to Stop, Too Sweet to Lose,” A sermon preached in Phoenix AZ, June 22, 1997.

Unitarian Universalists Latifa and Colin Woodhouse and their daughter Alexandra were concerned about the refugees arriving on the shores of the small island of Lesbos in Greece.<sup>6</sup> Last January, they raised money from their friends and fellow church members and went to Greece to help for a week with the UU Service Committee. When they arrived, they connected with the organization PRAKSIS which was providing aid to refugees in the form of medical care, legal assistance, and psychological and financial support.

The Woodhouses worked alongside volunteers from around the world and with the refugees themselves, from sunrise to well past sunset. Latifa is fluent in the Farsi and Pashto languages, and can converse in Arabic and Urdu, so she was able to translate for new arrivals and help them to get the assistance they needed in the refugee camp. Volunteers also distributed clothing, firewood, and food, and worked on creating vital camp infrastructure like walkways, and making the medical tent and other areas accessible to wheelchairs.

Latifa wrote this while she was there: “During the past four days we have gone to the shore at night and welcomed the boats that have arrived in the dark. There is truly so much one can do. Especially with my language ability, I have been everywhere. At the health clinics to translate for doctors. At clothing facilities to make sure every one is fitted properly. At the information booth to guide them to buy their tickets for Athens and how to register as they arrive from Turkey. It goes on and on. I have become everyone’s aunt and sister.”

Latifa was honoring the covenant of care that connected her to the people who were suffering across the world. The Woodhouses' trip to Greece is one way our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is continuing the work of supporting refugees and those in danger from war. They are also working in a dozen other spots around the world where people are in danger. But they don't do this work on their own. The UU Service Committee is funded by ordinary folks across our faith community who are willing to donate a little of our own money or time to make it work. They welcome volunteers in programs for both youth and adults.

Sometimes our values may call us to leave behind our ordinary routines and go to another place to lend a hand. Sometimes our values may call us to help others to do that, by our support. For example, in order for Martha and Waitstill Sharp to go to Europe, they needed friends to care for their children. I am sure you parents can imagine how challenging it might be to make that request, or to say yes to taking in a seven year old and a two year old child for several months. The Sharps were also working hard to find places for refugees to live and work, and needed the help of people who could offer that. They were encouraging their government to open up the border so that people would be able to find refuge. All those issues exist in our times as well.

Martha Sharp once said, “If I asked you to do something where you knew that just a little of your effort, and a little of your contribution, would make it possible for you to really aid a family to survive, let’s say for a week ... I bet you’d do it.”

Sometimes we can help right in our own town, in our own congregation. Our church has been asked to become a host congregation for the Family Promise Interfaith Hospitality Network here in Portland.

---

6 From <http://www.uusc.org/on-the-ground-in-greece/>

Because the shelters are overflowing, Family Promise has a proposal to create hospitality for homeless families by cooperation with local faith communities. Most of the people who need such shelter are immigrants—seeking asylum as they flee from dangerous situations in their own countries. Right now, the only place for them during the night is to sit up in the hallway at City Hall.

Host congregations are asked to offer meals, friendly conversation, and a place to sleep for up to five families, for two to four weeks of the year. Other host congregations would be offering such hospitality during other weeks of the year. During the day, the families would get help sorting out more permanent solutions to their struggles. We need a total of 13 host congregations in order to begin the program. Many volunteers would be needed to help by serving the meals, or staying overnight with the families. This help would not be dangerous, not even a big discomfort. But it is one way to honor our covenant to care for our fellow human beings who have faced so much danger.

There are many challenges facing our world today, and many ways we can offer help. We have to start by understanding our own values, and understanding what calls to us in our deepest hearts. What is our covenant with our fellow human beings who are suffering? What is our covenant with our neighbors? What is our covenant with the water, the soil, the animals, the plants?

When we know what our core values are, we will be more ready to answer the call for help that might come to us. When we keep those values in mind, we are better able to be courageous in how we live each day, doing our best to ease pain or put out fires of destruction. Mary Anne Radmacher said: "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow.'"

#### CLOSING WORDS

Our closing words are from *Martha Sharp*

"If I asked you to do something where you knew that just a little of your effort, and a little of your contribution, would make it possible for you to really aid a family to survive, let's say for a week ... I bet you'd do it." "One can only manage a miracle every so often, but a series of miracles can happen when many people become concerned and are willing to act at the right time."