

Wages of Dignity, Wages of Hope
Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Massachusetts
March 26, 2006

When the history books are written about the year 2005, I think it is safe to say that it will be remembered as the year of the natural disaster. From the Tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan to the devastating impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the Gulf Coast, last year demonstrated how vulnerable we are before the power of nature.

But these disasters reminded us of more than the destructiveness of storms and earthquakes. They also cast an uncomfortable light on another disaster, one that can be prevented: the disaster of economic injustice. Both here at home and across the world, this past year showed us the human face of poverty.

This is the poverty that makes us cringe when we read or hear about it. It is the poverty that kills thousands every day because their bodies are weakened by starvation and disease. It is the poverty that forces billions to go hungry and to drink unsanitary water. And it is the poverty that compels people to work for wages that barely put food on their tables and a roof over their heads.

I don't think it was the existence of such poverty that surprised us. After all, we frequently see images of drought and disease on the evening news. But most of those images are safely distant. We think of extreme poverty as being "over there" somewhere — somewhere far

from our homes and our communities. But the hurricanes on the Gulf coast showed us that poverty and injustice are closer than we think. They are right in our own backyards.

Imagine for a moment you are a single parent of two working for a large retail store in a major U.S. city. You work full time earning the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. That means you make \$10,700 a year. According to the federal government, you live well below the poverty line. In fact, you are part of a growing class known as the working poor.

You and your kids share a small apartment. The crime rate in your neighborhood is high and drugs are plentiful. Rent and food take most of your income. Every month, you pay for after-school care until your money runs out. Then your kids stay at home after school, alone and unsupervised.

And then there is your 12-year-old car. It sits idle because you don't have the money to get it repaired. And even if you could get the car running, gas prices make driving it a luxury you cannot afford.

Although the store where you work offers health benefits, you cannot afford them either. When asked about the high costs, the store manager tells you that if the company paid more for your health care it would mean fewer jobs. It might even mean your job.

Every month, you fall farther and farther behind. Your landlord threatens to evict you for being late with the rent. Because you are gone so much, your kids grow distant. You worry about the drugs and the neighborhood, but what can you do? You want to be there when they get home from school, to help them with their homework, and to protect them from bad influences. But you cannot. You have to work. In fact, you are already looking for a second job.

As your family stands on the brink of economic ruin, you feel like a failure. You are ashamed that your kids have to eat the same foods and wear the same clothes every day. You are humiliated when the store manager eyes you suspiciously every time you talk to a coworker, trying to determine if you are stirring up trouble. Your company announces record profits while paying you a poverty wage. You ask yourself why things have to be like this, especially in a country where so many have so much.

Then one summer day, you hear something about a hurricane heading in your direction. People come to your store and begin stocking up on flashlights, batteries, and nonperishable food. As the storm gets closer, talk of surging water and the need to evacuate grows louder. You begin to fear for your family's safety. But you are helpless. You cannot evacuate. You have no cash. You have no credit cards. And your car sits parked, broken and with an empty gas tank.

As the storm nears, warnings are issued that your neighborhood is in a low-lying area. You see images of people fleeing in their cars. Huge

traffic jams choke the highways. But at least these people can get away. You and your kids are trapped — trapped by poverty and trapped by injustice.

This story is a composite of countless others told not only by the survivors of Hurricane Katrina but also by the working poor throughout our country. It is a story of vulnerability — a vulnerability caused by wages that keep people on the brink of being homeless and hungry. It is a story of greed — of large corporations that pad their profits on the backs of low-wage workers in the United States and around the world. And it is a story of indifference — of a society that ignores the injustice and suffering all around it.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. We work for a world of justice, equity, and compassion. Many of us live out those principles by serving hot meals at soup kitchens, by donating canned goods to food pantries, or by collecting clothes for families in need. I know, for example, that this congregation is involved in a number of wonderful programs, like the One Family Campaign and Make a Case for Children, which are playing an important role in the lives of children and families struggling to survive right here in Massachusetts.

But as noble and vitally necessary as programs are, I think we can all agree that they will not eradicate the deep-seated poverty Hurricane Katrina revealed. As the noted UU minister Richard Gilbert reminds

us, “It is so much easier to give someone bread to eat than it is to change the structures that make them hungry in the first place.”¹

While many of us want to take up Dick Gilbert’s challenge and change those structures, few of us know where or how to begin. For one thing, the media carry so many confusing messages about poverty. One channel tells us people living with poverty are to be blamed for their problems. Another shows images of protest marches against the evils of globalization. The noise gets so loud that we end up turning off and tuning out. Some of us give up. Others simply go back to the local soup kitchen or food pantry, never taking that first step on the road to making soup kitchens and food pantries unnecessary.

We are certainly confused about what to do. But we know something must be done. As the prophets of the Hebrew Bible remind us, inequality and injustice cannot be sustained. They tear societies apart. Poverty and deprivation inevitably lapse into mutual hatred and resentment. Indifference and inaction are no longer options. We cannot afford to sit idly by while so many in this world are denied, as Dr. King reminded us, “Three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.”² Something has to be done, and done now.

But what can be done? How can Unitarian Universalists answer Richard Gilbert’s call to change the structures that make people hungry, that make people homeless, and that make people vulnerable to

disasters like Katrina? How can we begin building a world in which equity, justice, and compassion are a reality for everyone, everywhere?

Let's take a moment and consider the story of Sally, a hard-working cook in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Like many workers in the low-wage economy, Sally struggled to pay for rent, food, medicine, and day care. Her family was one unexpected crisis away from economic disaster. Then the city of Santa Fe passed a living wage law. In simplest terms, these laws guarantee workers a wage that will enable them to escape poverty. The Santa Fe ordinance mandated that companies with 25 or more employees pay their workers a minimum of \$8.50 per hour. And in 2006, the living wage in Santa Fe is due to increase to \$9.50.

Now in many ways, Sally's life remains much the same. She works just as hard at the same job. She still faces her monthly living expenses. But Sally and her family face those expenses with less fear and more confidence. A major car repair or an expensive medical prescription do not threaten to put her family in the streets. And she is even able to put a little something away for that unexpected crisis.

In fact, one study suggests that an increase from the current minimum wage to just \$7.25 per hour would pay for almost two years of child care, full tuition at a community college for one year, or a year's worth of heat and electricity. Such a living wage would also have enabled the poverty-stricken victims of Hurricane Katrina to have the cash they needed to fill up their gas tanks or rent a car so that they could escape the surging floodwaters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The living wage is a just wage. It recognizes that no human being should have to work full time and remain poor. Living wage laws shore up the safety net by creating an economic floor that prevents low-wage workers from falling into poverty. Such laws make it possible for workers like Sally to provide for their families without having to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine.

There are over 120 cities and counties that have enacted living wage ordinances, and the numbers keep growing. Their popularity stems from the fact that the living wage cuts through all the political posturing to get at the root cause of poverty, namely low incomes.

The living wage movement shares Dr. King's belief that "There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American."³

No job in this country, or anywhere in the world for that matter, should force someone to go hungry or homeless. If our world is to be a place of justice, a place of equity, and a place of compassion, the words "working" and "poor" must never go together.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is committed to tearing down those structures of injustice that trap so many people in poverty. Working closely with community-based partners around the world, UUSC strives to transform poverty wages into living wages and to guarantee that workers can organize to protect their rights. UUSC is

working through a multi-faith coalition called Let Justice Roll to lead living wage campaigns across the United States. UUSC also partners with organizations like STITCH, which provides Central American women with the skills and training they need to defend their rights by organizing themselves into unions.

What organizations like these and other UUSC partners do is make it possible for workers to escape the poverty, desperation, and humiliation that accompany low-wage work. They help transform a global economy that so often rewards greed and exploitation into an instrument of genuine economic opportunity and hope. Working with its partners, UUSC is taking a leading role in building a world in which, according to the Hebrew prophet Amos, “Justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

But UUSC and its partners cannot do it alone. They need our help. They need our advocacy and support for living wage ordinances in our state and local communities. They need our e-mails and calls to political leaders when international trade agreements threaten to undermine fundamental protections for workers. And they need our power as consumers and shareholders to send a clear message that poverty wages and violations of worker rights are both immoral and unacceptable.

Besides supporting living wage campaigns, another way every one of us can have an immediate impact in the global struggle for economic justice is by supporting the fair trade movement. Now I understand that this congregation already participates in the UUSC’s Fair Trade

coffee project so I'm really preaching to the choir but let me take a moment to say something about why Fair Trade is so important.

In simplest terms, Fair Trade guarantees coffee growers an above-market price for their product. This price provides growers — many of whom are members of small cooperatives in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa — with a living wage. The income from fair trade enables these growers to stay on their land, feed their families, and keep their children in school.

While the fair trade movement is small, it is having an impact. Companies like Equal Exchange are turning a profit, which is pressuring major coffee companies into offering fair trade coffee. And just recently, McDonald's began serving fair trade coffee at its restaurants.

What these developments show is that the coffee we drink can change the world. So if your friends and co-workers wonder why you are so particular about the coffee you drink, just tell them that drinking a cup of fair trade coffee is like drinking a cup of justice.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that passing living wage laws, supporting worker rights, and drinking fair trade coffee will rid the world of poverty. But I do want to suggest that they are good places to begin.

By working closely with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, we can all join the global struggle for economic justice. Without our help, low wages will not be turned into living wages. Without our help, the rights of workers to organize and to join a union will not be protected. And without our help, a world filled with greed and suffering will not, in the words of Dr. King, “be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”⁴

This struggle will be long and difficult. At times, progress may seem slow. But progress can be made. In fact, it already *is* being made. And with the energy and commitment of each and every one of us, justice *will* roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Together, we *can* make a difference.

I would like to leave you with these words from the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” May it be so. Amen.

Benediction – Edward Everett Hale

I am only one.

But still I am one.

I cannot do everything,

But still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything

I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.