

## **Beyond Religion: the Call to Shared Humanity**

Rev. Roger Jones

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns (Singing the Journey): #1000, Morning Has Come; #1002, Comfort Me; #1018, Come and Go with Me.

### Chalice Lighting Words

#### By the Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana

[N'DAGI-JIMANA], from the Assembly of Unitarian Christians in Burundi. In the repression and violence following Burundi's last presidential election, Fulgence was detained for several days and interrogated by the government. The church he served had its property confiscated. After his release, he fled the country. Right now he is visiting UU congregations in the U.S. and Canada. Since I can't read his native languages of Kirundi or French, these are his words in English:

When people meet, endless possibilities emerge: New cultural experiences and openness to new ways of understanding and doing things. A special attention to *the other* and a sense of service beyond self-development. Today, this morning, let us light the chalice for openness, willingness to grow, enriching curiosity, and active cooperation.

### Sermon: Beyond Religion

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibet, especially Tibetan Buddhists. Now based in India, the Dalai Lama travels the world speaking and writing. He's been exiled from his homeland by the Chinese government, which claims Tibet as its own. His courage and wisdom have earned him the respect of people of every faith and people of no religious affiliation. To his many fans, the Dalai Lama says [paraphrased], "Don't feel you need to become a Buddhist. If you are Christian, that's good. Be a better Christian. Whoever you are, whatever you are, practice being a better human

being." When he was just a boy, leaders identified him as the reincarnation of a previous Dalai Lama, and he began training as a monk at age 6. But this early fame didn't make him a tyrant. With a twinkle in his eye, he has suggested that the position of a Dalai Lama may have outlived its usefulness. Or perhaps after his death, he said, the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama will be found in a young woman.

But he is serious as well. He worries about the state of the world and our human fate. He pleads for human understanding and compassion and seeks justice and freedom. To survive, the human family has to find a set of ethics and values which can be shared universally regardless of religion, beyond religion. That is the title of one of his books, *Beyond Religion*. Yet he notes that human values for centuries have been grounded in religious traditions. Even today, for many people, religious participation continues to be a source of ethics and guiding values. For example, the image of a loving God motivates many of us to try to treat our neighbors as ourselves. Another example, from the Dalai Lama's book: the Buddhist idea of reincarnation invites you to consider that any living being could have been your parent in a previous lifetime. Yet he asserts that religion is not necessary for the pursuit of ethics and values.

He makes the analogy of plain water and tea. Human values are like water, he says. They are basic. We need them to live and survive together. Yet every cultural and religious tradition has its own way of expressing and affirming those human values. These traditions are like tea: they flavor the water and fortify it. They make it appealing. Black or green tea, for example; plain or spiced, with sugar or not. If you're in Tibet, it's tea with salt. Water signifies the indispensable values; tea symbolizes how we receive and promote these values in our own culture or faith tradition.

So what belongs in the water that all of us need? What sustaining values does the Dalai Lama propose as universal ones, no matter our culture, no matter our faith? He identifies two ethical principles in which our actions can be grounded.

register and we took their picture for the directory. It was clear that joining this community was a big

step for our new members, and one full of meaning.

I mentioned role models, and I want to tell you about one of mine. He wrote these words, which we used for today's Chalice Lighting: When people meet, endless possibilities emerge: New cultural experiences and openness to new ways of understanding and doing things. A special attention to *the Other* and a sense of service beyond self-development.

The Rev. Fulgence Ndagajima is a husband and father and a minister to the Unitarians in Burundi. He's 40. I met him seven years ago in Europe at a conference of the [International Council of Unitarians and Universalists](#). We were in a small group together, every day for a week. It was like a [spiritual deepening circle](#) here at UUSS, but for a week. I can't remember why he left his original path toward the Roman Catholic priesthood and then chose to become a Unitarian. I suspect it had to do with not accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, and the inability to get married as a priest. Recently on his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, Fulgence posted a summary of his journey.

In 1972, just a few years before his birth, people from the Hutu ethnic group in Burundi suffered a genocide perpetrated by people of the Tutsi tribal group. In the West we are more familiar with this inter-tribal violence in Rwanda in the 1990s. Burundi has its own history, yet the 1972 genocide was not taught in the schools of Burundi.

Fulgence learned about bigotry and intolerance firsthand. His older brother recalled those times. One day his brother's teacher had been taken out of the classroom while leading class in front of the students. They never saw him again.

Fulgence himself would experience later killing crises in Burundi. When he began high school, he attended a boarding school away from home. He recalls this:

One night, we went to sleep and I woke up in the middle of the night to find I was alone in the dormitory. Yes, I was alone. I went out and found two camps [Tutsis and

He writes: "The first principle is the recognition of our shared humanity and our shared aspiration to happiness and the avoidance of suffering; the second [principle] is the understanding of interdependence as a key feature of [human] reality."

He says: "It is by moving beyond narrow self-interest that we find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life." We don't need religion to move beyond narrow self-interest; we need only to cultivate these basic values, and live by them.

Such values resonate with me: shared humanity and inter-dependence. In fact, I think I've heard them someplace recently. Maybe here! Human dignity is the first principle of Unitarian Universalism. The web of interdependence is our seventh principle.

Last Wednesday evening Rev. Lucy and I led a session called the Meaning of Membership. We explained how a person becomes a member of this congregation, and what it means—the benefits as well as the responsibilities. Three congregants gave brief testimonials about what being part of UUSS means for them. One man spoke of building friendships here and working together with others on projects. Another person told us that she found role models here, people whose joy, love and courage were inspirational to her. She comes here to be reminded of her deepest values and to receive support in living them out. Another praised the warmth of our welcome and the sense of authenticity in this place, and the availability of mentors for her and for her children.

We are not the only kind of religious community where you can hear such gratitude and appreciation by its members. There are so many diverse traditions, all with devoted members. Every denomination, every congregation is a unique flavor of tea. Each one has a unique mix of beliefs, history, values, rituals, architecture, service projects and social activities.

Each one appeals to different people for different reasons. But *this* community, here, is the right one for those who find it to be so. At the end of that class several people signed the membership

Hutus]. I refused to be a part of either camp. A handful of born-again evangelical [Christians] refused [also]. We were in the middle of the two camps ... calling for love and common sense to prevail. They didn't prevail. The school ... eventually saw most of the Hutus gone and their bedding and books burnt.

The school closed, and he transferred to a high school run by Catholic priests in the capital city. He says the priests hid people at risk of harm, and their school was attacked for it. When he became a young adult, Fulgence resisted the military draft. Instead of this, Fulgence began teaching French in a boys' Catholic seminary school.

He says that rebels attacked another seminary school not far from his. They rounded up the boys. They ordered them to separate themselves into Tutsis and Hutus. Following their Christian faith, and upholding their common humanity, the boys refused to separate themselves. The rebels killed them all.

After some years of calm, Fulgence and his Unitarian church parishioners thought stability and sanity would return to Burundi, but he was wrong. Located in the capital city, his congregation includes human rights workers and other non-governmental organization workers. Fulgence himself was working for an NGO; ministry is his volunteer job.

In the past year, there have been public protests against the president's illegal third term. After the protests began, the Unitarian church was investigated. Many members were threatened. Fulgence was arrested and interrogated. In protest, Unitarian Universalists from here and other countries wrote letters of protest. Some of you wrote Burundi's ambassador in Washington, and wrote our State Department as well.

Fulgence is thankful for that solidarity. He also is grateful to people close to home who saved his life. He listed them in his recent post, starting with "the children, who alerted the [local] police" that the government was coming after him.

He writes: "The head of the local police station ... refused to give in to the request to take me to the intelligence service detention center

called 'the killing ground' in the middle of the night; [then a] local elected official ... alerted my family and church members." He goes on to thank "the policeman who gave me the phone to call 'one Unitarian.'"

He thanks "the crowd that gave me food after going hungry all day [in the jail yard].... All of these people were from a different ethnic group than me."

Fulgence *was* released. He fled to another country. His wife and eight-year-old son had left the year before, but he had to leave behind his church and his aging parents--for the sake of survival. Currently he's traveling and speaking at Unitarian Universalist congregations in the U.S. and Canada. He is on his way to our denomination's General Assembly, which begins in a week in Columbus, Ohio.

He writes: "In 40 years, I have seen a lot. In 40 years, I have experienced a lot. ... I have seen tragedies before my eyes. ... I have seen humanity at work and great things have been achieved through this *partnership* in humanity."

Beyond religion, beyond ethnicity, beyond gender or sexuality, beyond privilege or the lack of it—beyond all of these categories is our shared humanity.

Every time someone chooses to take a risk to help a person at risk, every act of mercy, and every gesture of generosity, kindness, or courage — these are the building blocks of what he calls a partnership in humanity. Given his ordeal, the words I quoted from him earlier are quite poignant:

When people meet, endless possibilities emerge: New cultural experiences and openness to new ways of understanding and doing things. A special attention to *the Other* and a sense of service beyond self-development.

This brings me to a telephone call I received recently. Jeff VonKanel, the publisher of the *Sacramento News & Review* is a member of the board of directors of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Sacramento. He was eager to tell me that they are launching a project entitled [Build for Unity](#). This is an effort of a diversity of local religious institutions to promote cooperation across

faiths, and solidarity with Muslim congregations. The motivation for this outreach was the desire to respond to anti-Muslim hostility and suspicions now plaguing our country and our community. In particular, these leaders were troubled by the recent escalation of anti-Muslim rhetoric in political campaigns. After today's atrocity in Orlando, I can imagine this hostility will get worse.

The goal of this project is to demonstrate that Muslim families are not only our neighbors but also contributing and caring members of the community. Another goal is to build homes in this area for two families between August and December of this year. (Habitat has identified two families of Ukrainian immigrants for these homes.)

To promote fellowship and connections, Build for Unity events will be hosted by various congregations in this region, with food at those events, of course, and activities for children. It started in January, with a ceremony at the Sikh house of worship with a shared meal following. People were invited to sign their names on plywood boards and add their good wishes and blessings. The plywood will be part of the frame of each new house. He invited me *to invite you* to participate as a congregation.

Here is what comes next. Leaders have designed and written an eight-page publication to raise awareness of this project; it will invite people to participate, by giving of their time, labor and money. Several congregations have signed on, and their names will be listed as partners in this project. In July this publication will be distributed as an insert in the *Sacramento Bee* and in the *News and Review*. Additional copies will be delivered to congregations all over the place. A web version will appear online.

Jeff, the Habitat for Humanity board member, is present with us today. He told me their vision is to launch Build for Unity projects in over 100 cities around the country, but Sacramento is where it starts.

To have our name listed as a sponsor, the donation from USSS would be \$1,000 or more. The money goes toward publicity and toward the materials needed to start building the houses. The

Build for Unity project is going to distribute 200,000 copies of this insert in a few weeks. I asked our Board of Trustees to approve the listing of our USSS name with the other sponsors. They said yes. They also authorized me to invite donations from you to help cover the \$1,000. I hope you will think about it.

If you would like to make a donation, see me after the service or give me a call. If you are eager to learn more, I can email information to you or leave it for you to pick up at the office. If you're into building a house or two--and building friendships as you do it--we'll be hearing about that soon.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, there are many ways to build fellowship and partnerships based in our shared humanity. May this most recent local innovation give us hope.

“When people meet, endless possibilities emerge.” Beyond religion, beyond ethnicity, beyond privilege or the lack of it—beyond all of these categories—is our shared humanity.

Every time someone chooses to take a risk to help a person at risk, every act of mercy, every gesture of generosity, kindness, or courage —these are the building blocks of a partnership in humanity.

So may we live and work and hope and pray. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Build for Unity kickoff event video at this link: