

Sunday, June 7, 2009
Unitarian Church of Calgary

**“Working for Peace, Liberty and Justice for All:
Social Justice by our Members”**

Introduction by Rev. Meg Roberts

One of our Unitarian principles encourages us to work for peace, liberty and justice for all. When our church services committee met last June to plan services for this year, one of the ideas that got a lot of support was to ask a couple of people from our congregation who do work for peace, liberty and justice for all in their paid work or in their volunteer work. This morning I have asked two of our members, Ramesh Joshi and Hazel Corcoran, to share with us about the work they do on behalf of justice and why this work is part of their being a Unitarian.

What the Immigrant Professionals face in this land of plenty?
Homily by Ramesh Joshi

Rev. Roberts asked me to speak about my efforts as an atheist Unitarian in the area of social justice. How the council of foreign trained immigrant professionals also known by its abbreviated name COFTIMPA came into being and what has been the experience so far and what solutions have been considered to resolve the issue.

During the last 32 years or so that I have been here I realized that immigrants face problems despite the immense good will of many to welcome them with open arms.

Since times immemorial people all over the world have been migrating for reasons too many to list. That is how we have populated this green planet. Nonetheless it is only human for all such immigrants to secure a safe place and then seek work to survive and thrive as the previous ones have done.

Yet, it also seems to be an innate desire amongst many, if not all of us, to preserve our place we have achieved. But education and democracy have changed the environment and even created a more level playing field almost every where they have taken root. Education alone was once the preserve of the few but not in an enlightened democracy.

Still the habits die hard.

As Gandhi said one's accumulation deprives some one's need.

One way to protect the wealth, status or the ego is through the self Governing Professional Associations and their bureaucracies. “Immigrant professionals from most countries have to take many examinations to prove the validity of their educational credentials as well as their experience before being admitted to these professional

associations. It is understandable that the associations want to check their skill and knowledge level, but why should many of them be required to re-take years of education here in Canada after they have served as professionals in their home countries? Surely there must be another way to help them translate their experience to the Canadian context more expediently so they can work as professionals in Canada, where we desperately need professionals such as doctors, engineers, nurses, etc.”

Almost every one knows that there are immigrant Doctors, Engineers, Geologists, Geophysicists, Accountants, Nurses, Bankers, and many other professionals who are forced to make a living by working as security guards, taxi drivers, house cleaners etc.

Since I am an Engineer, besides being a RETARDED or RETIRED educator as well as an engineering business owner, I know a little if not a lot about this profession.

The Association of Professional Engineers here in Alberta as well as in other provinces does not consider even the people with higher degrees such as Masters and Ph. D. degrees equal to the Canadian undergraduate degree.

Even engineers with advanced degrees from Germany, Switzerland, and all European Union countries (except for France?) as well as countries from Eastern Europe South and South East Asia, Latin America are not allowed to enter the profession even if they have exceptionally good communication skills.

All the immigrant professionals came to this country with a world wide advertisement of the Canadian Government issued at the request of the provincial Governments. Every one paid a fee of \$ 175 to get their credentials verified by respective umbrella agency of the self governing associations. That process took 2 to 6 years. The Immigrant professionals gave up their cushy jobs and luxurious living in many cases to avail of the opportunity to immigrate to this sweet land of ours known for high standard of living and human rights protection even in the foreign lands.

But on arrival here in Canada they were all told their degrees are no good except for a few lucky ones.

The result is that they live on poverty wages driving taxis, cleaning houses, working as security guards etc., since they spent all their savings in paying various fees related to immigration and transportation costs. They can not afford to spend time on so called improvement of their education and ignore the family needs for survival.

The provincial and federal Governments have given away millions of dollars to many agencies to assist the immigrants in improving or upgrading their education. But none of them does so. They train them in writing resumes and becoming skilled laborers.

I have discussed the matter with different political leaders and they all empathize but offer no solution. Senior Conservative MLAs have asked me to apply for funds for training the immigrants. But they declined to change the laws which have empowered

these associations with impunity to keep the immigrant professionals out of the lucrative jobs by the self governing professions. In the mean time individuals and companies make money using the services of such immigrants by paying them technician or even lower wages.

Many of the immigrants would love to return to their homelands. But they dare not since they will have no job waiting for them there either. Above all they will be ridiculed in the society for having failed in the race to chase after the greener pastures.

Council of Foreign Trained Immigrant Professionals or COFTIMPA was created with the aim of assisting all such immigrants including doctors, engineers, dentists, accountants and the others.

We have 70 members to date. With my heartfelt thanks I wish to express that the Unitarians have been very helpful and form the largest group of the organization as far as membership is concerned.

We have had three meetings of the Council and are in the process of deciding the course of action.

There is a very simple solution to this man-made social justice problem of unemployment and underemployment amongst the immigrant professionals. Let the Govt. spend money in training the immigrant doctors, engineers and all others by placing them under the local doctors, engineers and other respective professionals to learn local practices and customs. "The Government would pay each Canadian professional an amount to offer such training, and the Government would also pay the immigrant professional a living wage to cover the training period to keep the family from going hungry. After the training period is completed and if considered to be competent, the local doctors, engineers and other professionals can then recommend such immigrant professional trainees to be admitted to the professions and allowed to practice independently and realize the fruits of their education and efforts. It will cost much less and would allow all the capable professionals to join the work force and pay taxes rather than living on social welfare or on low wages. The expenditure will be recovered very fast and long wait lines and mistakes in health care and engineering practices will be eliminated. Funds wasted in training for resume writing will not solve social justice problem ever.

I wish to request you all those who can to please join me in advancing the cause of these highly educated professionals and their children living in misery, poverty and humiliation. Most of these professionals also have an added advantage of communication in one or more languages and the knowledge of their cultures so essential in today's global and knowledge bases economy. Social Justice problems are created by humans and can be very easily solved using thoughtful/critical analysis and no super natural is needed to intervene since we know not one exists or not. I think not.

An Economy of Hope **Homily by Hazel Corcoran**

When I hear of the new documentary called *Fierce Light* about people being called to Social Justice work through spirituality, this speaks to me. From the time I was 12 years old, I was strongly attracted to working for social justice. I think this came from the fact that I grew up in New Orleans, & was exposed at an early age to all the kinds of injustice that the world saw during the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Seeing poverty, racism, and injustice all around me, combined with the values I learned being raised Catholic about what is right and wrong gave me a burning drive to work to make the world a better place.

I spent my 20's trying to figure out what might be the best way to do that. Part of that involved going to law school, to learn to be more effective at social justice work, planning perhaps to become a refugee lawyer. While in law school, I followed my instinct to explore more about the co-operative economic model. I had only a vague understanding of what that meant. However as soon as I started to do my research, I realized that I had found what I'd been looking for. After briefly practicing law, I sought & found work in the co-operative movement.

I along with my colleagues worked very hard to build our organization and the worker co-op movement. I always felt that this work was more of a spiritual calling than a regular job.

Now I'd like to talk generally about what this work means, why I do it & what I hope for the future.

In the capitalist approach to economy, the over-arching driving force is the pursuit of profits. Profit-making takes precedence, in some cases legally mandated, over the needs of workers, the community & the environment. In the co-operative model, there is a balance. The purpose of a co-operative is mutual self-help: to enable the members to meet their own needs & each other's needs. Co-ops can be either not-for-profit or, more typically, for-profit. Profit is typically called a "surplus" in a co-operative. The surplus represents what members have paid in excess of the costs of providing the goods or service. This surplus is generally returned to the members based on how much of the service they have used – how much they have contributed to the surplus. The profit, or surplus, is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

There are many different types of co-operatives. There are housing co-ops (like Prairie Sky); there are farmers' co-ops like the Wheat Pools were, consumer-owned co-ops like Mountain Equipment Co-op, Calgary Co-op & United Farmers of Alberta where consumers got together & realized they needed something which at the time they started wasn't being supplied well or at fair prices in the capitalist market. There are financial co-ops, called Credit Unions, like First Calgary where I am currently on the Board. There are worker co-ops where the employees own the business, e.g. Taxi Co-ops. There are

also social co-ops, which are established to meet needs such as for daycare, health care, & even funeral services. The co-op model is wide-spread but very poorly understood. What is even less understood is their potential. In Canada, 40% of the population is a member of a least 1 co-op or credit union; in Alberta, the percentage is 65%. The sector has over \$275 Billion in assets in Canada alone.

Typically waves of co-operatives are built in times of economic crisis. A lot of the large co-ops today were built in the 1930's or shortly after, & another group in the 1970's. In fact, the first co-operative started in northern England at the height of the excesses of the Industrial Revolution, in 1844, as a response to the kinds of conditions that Charles Dickens wrote about. Today, across the world, the co-operative vision has come alive in dramatic & extremely diverse ways: from flexible manufacturing networks based on worker-managed firms in northern Italy, to the highly participatory women-controlled neighbourhood co-operatives in Kerala, India, to the Brazilian Landless Movement's occupations and co-operative enterprises, to the hundreds of firms closing their doors (notably in Argentina) which are being seized by their workers & turned into worker co-operatives, & to the many new co-ops being formed by immigrants here in Canada.

Again, we are seeing renewed interest now b/c of the economic crisis. Co-operatives provide a mechanism for people to come together formally to meet their own socio-economic needs – and the needs are greater when the mainstream economy fails.

Now I will quote from the International Statement of Co-operative Identity. As you think about this, also think about the commonalities with Unitarianism, and ALSO to what degree the co-ops you're aware of seem to be living these values & principles.

*“Co-operatives are based on the **values** of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.” The seven co-operative **principles** are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice. The principles include democratic member control, the importance of member education & training, & concern for community.*

To go back a little bit to my own story: in the aftermath of Sept 11th, a group of co-op activists around the country, & beyond, starting to talk & e-mail furiously about how we felt the world was in simply desperate need of the co-operative message. We felt that no matter how tirelessly we worked (and we *were*, and have been doing that!), our message was not getting out effectively. This group started to talk about the notion that we needed to go straight to the public with the message, through popular culture. To do this, we would need to enlist musicians, writers & other artists, including people who already had some public profile, to help spread the word. The basic notion was “thinking big” to get out the message, so we started to call it “**the Big Idea**.”

With the advent of the Big Idea, I have felt even more strongly that this is a spiritual calling for me. I also since learned that many of the concentrations of co-ops in different parts of the world have been developed by spiritual leaders: from Catholic, Jewish,

United church traditions and more. And, in the very first co-op, in Rochdale, England: many of the founding members were Unitarian, & the early meetings were held in the basement of the local Unitarian church. I was a Unitarian by the time I found out about this connection there, & discovering this affirmed for me the bringing together of my UU self & my activist self. There are many, many connections. Co-ops which have been supported by Unitarians, at least in part, include: the United Farmers of Alberta, the Afghani Women's Sewing Worker Co-op near Vancouver (significant support came from the First UU Church of Vancouver); Unitarian preschool co-ops in the US; the Calgary Co-op Memorial Society; Prairie Sky Co-housing & other housing co-ops; there's even a UU Poets Co-operative. Our own past Minister William Irvine (approx. 1916-1930) was deeply engaged in the co-operative movement. He wrote, "Through established co-operation, such enemies of the people as hunger, ignorance disease & war might be destroyed forever, as it seeks maximum well-being for all. Instrumental was also involved in the founding of the *Co-operative Commonwealth Federation*, and I would ask you to think the meaning of this political party's name. The person who was chosen by the International Co-operative Alliance to coordinate the world-wide consultation to revise the co-op principles in 1995 is a Unitarian from Victoria; Ian MacPherson. There is a new book out about the links between values in Christianity, Judaism & Islam to the co-operative principles; it is called called *Holy Co-operation!* (I think I'll need to submit to the author a suggested chapter on Unitarianism!)

The Big Idea group has created a lot since 9/11: writings, created a web site, presentations, a Co-operative Manifesto, & we incorporated a foundation. Also, my husband & member of this congregation Greg O'Neill published a CD of original music whose proceeds he donates to the Foundation However most of us are in the trenches of developing & supporting co-ops where we have figured out how to make a living & don't have enough time to devote to this cause. We keep hoping that we'll be able to find way to really do it. We have sought several different grants so that someone in our group could quit their other, more practically focused job & be dedicated to the Big Idea. However we don't really fit into anyone's "box" & so far at least, the grants have been rejected. But we will not give up. We hope to start a "Big Idea Band" & start promoting the music with a message. We hope to improve our web site. We hope to hold "Coopalooza's" all over the country, music festivals which attract many young people & where the co-op message can be spread at the same time. Relatedly, we see great collaboration with the labour movement in our future which has already begun & gone extraordinarily well. The leadership in the Cdn labour movement gets it.

Among other things, we hope to hold "Coopalooza's" in many different places: music festivals which attract many young people & others, & where the co-op message can be spread. The Big Idea group has begun to develop some alliances with people who have a public profile— eg, Naomi Klein & Avi Lewis (recall the film, *The Take*, or see Naomi's *Shock Doctrine* book & her blog). I also understand that Michael Moore is making a film on the current economic crisis & he features co-operatives as one solution. Importantly, we have music by Greg O'Neill which is in part on the topic of the potential of co-operatives. You can see the Big Idea web site if you'd like to know more: www.bigidea.prairiesky.ab.ca .

We have some major challenges. One is that some of the large co-ops, especially consumer co-ops & credit unions, have been behaving like capitalist businesses, led by conventionally trained CEO's who don't see or particularly support the co-operative advantage. The model is very poorly understood & not actively taught, anymore, in schools & universities. However as in all past economic crises: the fact that the current challenges are exposing the inherent problems in the mainstream system presents a huge opportunity. People are now searching for alternatives, & co-operatives can help to drive recovery.

How can you be involved? Join & patronize existing co-operatives. If you don't like the way they're operating, remember that they're democratic institutions: attend their AGM, or even run for their Board of Directors.. They belong to you. If you have, or see needs which are not being met, consider starting a co-op along with others to help meet them. Or, learn to help other people develop co-ops. [If you've gotten really excited, drop everything & come with me to the 100th anniversary Congress of the Canadian Co-operative Association taking place in mid-June in Ottawa!:
www.coopscanada.coop/100th/congress.htm]

In sum, I subscribe to the theory by a colleague in the US; acronym: TINMI SCWYCD T(A)CD: which stands for: There Is No More Important Social Change Work You Can Do Than Cooperative Development. It's about fundamentally changing the economy so that people matter more than profit; so that we can create an environment in which people are free to discover the gifts that they bring to this world and have a way to develop them and contribute them to the common good.

Co-ops are about building an economy based on hope and love. The potential is absolutely huge. This is why one of the most important spiritual expressions of my life is the promotion of co-operatives.

And now we'll hear one of Greg's original compositions, the Big Idea song. (available at: www.myspace.com/gregbigidea Click on "The Big Idea song").

If you would like more information, see:

- (1) CoopZone: about developing new co-operatives, & expanding existing ones, www.coopzone.coop
- (2) International Co-operative Alliance: www.ica.coop
- (3) The Big Idea: www.bigidea.prairiesky.ab.ca