

## UUs Linking the Local with the Global by Jean Davison

UU Church of Ellsworth, Sunday, August 16, 2009

**Opening Words:** A Poem by a fellow Mainer, D. Immonen

Exploring,  
Day heavy with impending storm,  
This Maine has hints of the Orient;  
Tibet, colors of prayer flags –  
Bright blues, gashes of yellow orange, impossible green.

Here is a three-sided shed  
Lined with firewood,  
Decorated with silver cobwebs.  
And there is smooth birchbark on the ground,  
To write letters to friends who are children.

And a quote from Antonio Porchia

“You will find the distance  
That separates you from them,  
By joining them, as we light the chalice.”

Now let us stand and begin with a song  
The Opening Hymn: No. 21, verses 1 and 4

**Spoken Meditation:** ERR, Poem “Equinox Receding,” J. Davison  
**Silent Meditation**

**The Responsive Reading:** page 602. It is by Lao-Tze

**Offering**

**Hymn 74** “The Earth Our Drum”

**READINGS** Two poems: the first is by a Muslim Arab woman, Wallada Bint al-Mustakfi, who embroidered in gold the following lines of poetry into her skirt long before any of us was born.

“I was made for the high things in life,  
By God, when I walk, I swagger with pride.  
I give my cheek to my lover  
And my kiss to the one who craves it.” (comment)

From “Conversations with Ogotemmel,” a Dogan spiritual leader  
From Mali, West Africa, as he leads prayers before planting.

Oh God! Receive the morning greeting!  
Ancestors, Receive the morning greeting!  
We are here on this chosen day,  
We go out to sow the seed,  
We are going out to cultivate.

Oh God! Cause the millet to germinate.  
Make the eight seeds sprout  
And the ninth calabash.  
Give a wife to him who has none!  
And to him who has a wife without children,  
Give a child.  
Protect men against thorns,  
Against snake-bites,  
Against ill winds.  
Pour out the rain,  
As we pour water from a pot,  
Let the millet come.

### **Sermon: UUs Linking the Local with the Global** by Jean Davison

**Introduction.** These two poems, one by an Arab and the other by an African, complement the poems in the Opening Words that Martha and I read and illustrate the diversity of ways we express our deepest needs. What I want to do now is to link our lives here in Maine with those of others across the globe, like beads on a string.

**Maine Connections.** One of my earliest memories in Maine was going out cod-fishing with my Dad on Penobscot Bay. Cod still roamed these waters at that time. We aimed to catch ourselves some. We set our poles along the edge of the boat's guard rail and waited ... and waited. Then the bay began whipping up a bit of froth as we went out past Butter Island and Bear. For me, that day suddenly became a nightmare of nausea. I dumped my cookies more than once. Yet I managed to hang on and was awarded with one of the last cod caught that day. It made up for my agony.

When I think about what has happened to the cod in these waters over the years, and how fishermen and women have transformed themselves into lobstermen and women, I begin wondering if the lobsters will meet with a similar fate as the cod. But there is hope for these crustaceans. It lies in a unique global North/South partnership linking lobstermen in Maine with their counterparts in Australia. Conserving lobsters for the future is the spark for this match.

In the past two years, Maine lobstermen have gone half way round the world to learn how Australian lobster harvesters manage their intakes so the lobster populations are protected and sustained over time, thus ensuring their own livelihoods. Mainers have learned that the Aussies monitor the size of their catches through an equitable licensing system that cuts back on the number of boats taking lobsters and the quantity and size caught so there will be a future in lobstering along Australia's coasts. Maine lobsterers involved in the project have latched on to the solution and it is being tried by lead lobstermen here with some success. The exchange of knowledge and skills is mutual, enabling both sides to learn something new and offer their fellow lobsterers needed support.

**Global Organic Farming.** Another example of international collaboration is the organic farming movement. It is not only spreading like mushrooms through Maine's "grow local, buy local" movement, but I found that the Gikuyu farmers I once picked coffee and tea with in the foothills of Mt. Kenya, and who were encouraged by U.S. AID agronomists to use petrochemical fertilizers in the 1980s, have turned to increased vegetable production using their own organic farm compost the way their mothers taught them. What made for the change?

I was appalled in the eighties, when I was living in Kenya, to discover that our government was exporting chemical fertilizers from Monsanto and the likes to countries with little awareness of the pitfalls. Taking the side of the African farmers whom I worked with, I boldly pointed out to one USAID agronomist in Nairobi that these fertilizers not only depleted Africa's thin topsoil, but that transporting the heavy bags of US fertilizer to market centers in Kenya's highlands meant that women I knew had to hoist 60-pound bags onto their backs and carry them four miles, in some cases, up to their homesteads on the ridges. Many of them became refuseniks.

“The local people in Kirinyaga where I live,” I told the U.S. Aid agronomist, “use coffee husks as mulch and cow manure to fertilize their crops. Why doesn’t the U.S. encourage local solutions like this?”

He looked down at me sternly and said, “Don’t you know that our in-kind foreign aid is required to come from U.S. manufacturers with a ‘Made in the U.S.’ label? We aren’t in the business of supporting local producers.” Yet, ironically, when I returned to the U.S. in the 1990s, I began seeing bagged coffee husks – mulch -- popping up in American nurseries – a lesson from Africa?

The point of these stories, whether they concern fishing or farming, is that we need to learn how to join with others in equitable, right relationships that nurture joint solutions to our common problems. Could there be an answer to the spruce beetle blight in Kenya or Nepal? The only thing that stands in our way is the image and, sometimes, reality abroad of the “All-knowing, ugly American.” Learning goes both ways, and we still have much to learn ... if we are willing to listen.

**Food and the Dangers of American Altruism.** A second point I want to make in considering how best to link the local with the global concerns our well-meaning altruism, which sometimes goes awry. Locally, we Unitarians are doing great things to help others in times of need, such as the food pantry movement (your own Loaves and Fishes, being one example). But we need to be aware of the kind of food aid the Department of Agriculture ships abroad. It often consists of not-very-nutritious surplus food stocks, especially carbohydrates. Asking questions of our congresspeople about the forms our food aid takes can be a starting point.

We also need to be aware of cultural mores related to certain types of food. For example, it does nothing to encourage fish farming of tilapia if the gruel fed to the fish consists of ground pork and meal in an area populated by Muslims. I saw this graphically illustrated in Malawi, a tiny southern African country, where the majority of farmers are Muslim in the south. The farmers rejected a project introduced by American aquaculture scientists to improve protein in rural diets because the project designers had not taken cultural factors, such as religion, into consideration. They had neither listened nor done their homework. Cultural context matters.

**Housing.** We are also working toward affordable housing in our Maine communities so that we don’t wake up one day and find we have lost many families with children that used to brighten our lives. Hands on Housing is a laudable UU example, as is Habitat for Humanity, both at home and abroad. These organizations stress self-help, equitable collaboration, and encourage dignity.

What Americans need to be aware of, however, is that in countries that are struggling with a global debt burden, we may be creating new dependencies rather than self-sufficiency. Too often in the 1990s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund made loans with high interest rates to needy countries that little understood the loans they assumed and have had difficulty servicing them (Uganda example). Sound familiar? We are experiencing the same kind of thing at home with sub-prime loans schemes.

**UUA’s Role Abroad.** Finally, I want to say something about the kind of assistance abroad that the UUA envisions in spreading our denomination to the far corners of the globe. This summer, the “UU WORLD” magazine for members carried a lead article that described our interest in helping UU churches in Africa. In particular, the UU movement in urban Nairobi has begun to blossom in Kisii, Kenya. These are places I know something about having lived and worked in Kenya for over 30 years, off and on.

The rural Kisii that UUA President Sinkford and other UUs visited, lies in the rich tea-growing Rift Valley. The Kisii people who live there are like most other farmers in Kenya’s rural areas: When they see “*wazungu*” -- their word for whites, Europeans – coming around, dollar signs glow before their eyes. As one of the Kenyans who later came to live with our family in the U.S. admitted, “Before I came this way, I thought that America was a place where you walked down the road and dollars flew into your hands. Now I’ve found it’s not true. You have to work hard to get somewhere here. Americans are always working. And you have poor people, too. I never expected this.”

It is not surprising, then, that several new UU ministers in Kisii see the UU Association in Boston as the future cash cow for a multitude of projects (from clinics to early childhood centers to AIDS orphanages).

Linking these churches to the UUA will, above all, serve their financial needs. I'm not so sure, however, that Kenyan churches would be interested in a South/South partnership with, say, the UU church in the Philippines.

We need to ask ourselves, how viable are these Kisii congregations, in reality? The article did not say. Membership numbers were vague, when queried, and in several cases, inflated. In one case a minister canvassed the village to get all the Kisii he could find into the church for a Sunday service when the UUA team came through. How financially viable and sustainable are the projects these small churches hope will get funded through the UUA?

The larger question, and I'm playing devil's advocate here, is how meaningful and necessary is it to spread UUism to all corners of the globe? We need to be cautious as a denomination that we don't get hooked into a missionizing enterprise. Far better, is the small, individual grassroots initiative, such as the Kenyan project that Ashley Bryan described to us not long ago, or the efforts of groups like KIVA to support local entrepreneurs.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, we need to enter cautiously into parts of the world where we are little known and know little about the people and communities whose lives we want to touch and often change. It is not enough to want to bridge the global gap. We must look closely at our own motives for making the leap. There is much we have to learn from Kenyans, or Bolivians or Syrians that might improve our own lives, as the Maine lobstermen learned from the Australians. And there is certainly plenty to do at home. A Gikuyu saying has it right, "*Kahora, kahora kari indu*, Slowly, slowly will get the thing done."

**Reminder:** If you want to learn more about how rural Kenyans live and love on a daily basis, my book, "*The Ostrich Wakes: Struggles for Change in Highland Kenya*," will be for sale in the community room after the service, thanks to my friend, Dana.

**Closing Hymn:** in the aqua book, No. 1027, "Cuando el Pobre," which reminds us of the generosity of those who have little.

**Closing words:** Now let us join hands across the globe and with one another to recommit ourselves to the things we do best and that will ensure a more peace-filled world. Paz todo el mundo. Shalom, Salaam al leikum.