

THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP of HUNTINGTON



The Reverend Paul Ratzlaff, *Minister*
Carolyn Freud, *Director of Religious Education*

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The Decency of a Living Wage
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington
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Rev. Paul Ratzlaff

Once upon a time there was a beggar who would hang out by the door of the local bakery, taking in great draughts of the smells of the cakes, breads, and Danish. Each day he was there, gaunt-faced and in rags, his nose quivering as he inhaled the enticing odors. This so annoyed the owner that he had the beggar brought up on charges of stealing the smells of the bakery. In rendering her decision, the judge asked for a handful of money, and told the baker to step up close. She then held the money close to the baker's nose, saying, "There, you should be satisfied. The smell of money has paid you for the smell of your goods."

Does the baker wanting to squeeze out the cost of the smell from the beggar remind you of anyone today? How about the Walton family that owns Wal-Mart? "Wal-Mart CEO H. Lee Scott, Jr., made \$23 million in 2004, including stock options – more than twice the average for CEOs of the 500 largest U.S. companies. Sam Walton's heirs hold five of the top ten spots on the 2005 Forbes 400 richest Americans." (Holly Sklar and Rev. Dr. Paul H. Sherry, *A Just Minimum Wage*, [JMW] Produced by the American Friends Service Committee and the National Council of Churches, Oct. 2005, 38) They have come by their extraordinary wealth by squeezing wages, and denying workers health benefits. "By the company's own admission," the *Los Angeles Times* reports, "a full-time worker might not be able to support a family on a Wal-Mart paycheck." (JMW 35) This is our nation's largest employer. One out of every 115 workers in America works for Wal-Mart, and they are still expanding. Not only do they fail to pay enough to live on, in some places they give their new workers instructions on how to apply for Medicaid.

The Waltons are not the only ones. While wealth is being sucked to the very top of the ladder, it's being drained from the bottom.

"In 1980, the average CEO made as much as 97 minimum wage workers.

"In 2004, the average CEO made as much as 952 minimum wage workers." (JMW 13)

And this doesn't include all the perks such as "lifetime use of company jets, chauffeured cars, company apartments, club memberships, sports tickets, financial planning, personal assistants, and more." (JMW 14)

Our companies are happy to outsource jobs to lower wage countries - maybe we should outsource American CEOs to other parts of the world. Captains of industry cost less everywhere else. "U.S. CEOs make five times as much as CEOs in Japan, four times as much as CEOs in Spain and three times as much as CEOs in the United Kingdom, France, Italy and the Netherlands." (JMW 14)

Welcome back to the "gilded age." The "sucking sound" that Ross Perot reported hearing with NAFTA may be the sound of wealth rushing to the top here at home. "In 1979, the bottom third of taxpayers had more than twice as much combined income as the top tenth of 1 percent.

"In 2003, it was the other way around: The top tenth of the richest 1 percent of taxpayers had more income than the bottom third of taxpayers combined." (JMW 11)

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It used to be that as workers got more productive they shared in the increased wealth. But not over the last couple of decades. While productivity in the last 30 years has increased dramatically, the earning power of the minimum wage has decline by 24 percent. Where has all the new wealth gone? To the very top of the top.

As the extremes of wealth and poverty pull apart, the middle class is shrinking. “Median household income fell for an unprecedented fifth year in a row to \$44,389 in 2004 – down from \$46,129 in 1999, adjusting for inflation. (JMW 16)

This decline would be more obvious, but for one thing – women working. “Household income would look much worse, if not for the increase in household work hours, especially by women. [We already know this, right?] focusing on married-couple families in which both partners were under age 55, Boston Federal Reserve economists Katharine Bradbury and Jane Katz write, ‘The popular perception - that families needed to work ever more hours even to tread water – is confirmed. And the greatest part of this increase in hours came from wives.’ At the beginning of the 1970s, married women worked in paid employment ‘fewer than 600 hours a year, on average, while at the end of the 1990s they averaged nearly 1,400 annual work hours.’ Bradbury and Katz point out that ‘many families with children lost ground despite added work hours.’” (JMW 16)

We know this, right? We know it in the change we witness in the volunteer pool for our congregation.

And to pour salt in the wounds, the poorest pay a greater amount of payroll taxes than do the richest. “In 2004, the richest 1 percent (with an average cash income of \$978,000) paid just 8.2 percent of their income in total state and local taxes while those in the bottom fifth (with an average cash income of \$10,400) paid 11.8 percent.” (JMW 53) And there’s a crusade to make the tax cuts for the wealthy permanent!

“Since 1997, Congress has voted eight pay raises for itself, but not one dime for workers making the minimum wage. The annual salary for members of congress has gone up by \$31,600 in that time, while a minimum wage employee working full-time earns just \$10,700 a year.” (Jobs with Justice email 3/21/06)

Is that not ridiculous? Imagine, the typical minimum wage owner, a mother with children (that is the typical minimum wage earner!) What does it cost her to buy health insurance? More than her entire wages! This is impossible.

She could be working full-time and earn less than what our government labels as officially poor at \$13,020 for an adult and child. And we know our government label is abysmally low compared to the reality of living costs here in the New York area. It’s estimated that to meet your basic needs as a single adult with child in our area you would need an income approaching \$50,000 a year. (JMW 6) (Housing pushes these costs through the roof, as you well know.) In other words, you’d have to work nearly 5 full-time, minimum wage jobs to live a life of basic decency here.

It used to be commonly held by all Americans, whether Republican or Democrat, that people who worked hard should make a decent living. That is, if you worked your 40+ hours a week you

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should be able to afford the basics. Whatever one's political affiliation, we all prized a work ethic. But what's happened? What's happened when a "work ethic" has no relationship to a "wage ethic"?

I fear that we live in a time, like that of my opening story, when the rich want to extract even the bakery smells from the poor in our land. And I despair that we have judges as wise as in this old, old story – judges who see the foolishness of wringing the necks of the poor even more than they are already being squeezed.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: People work full time, but have to choose between paying the rent and paying for child care.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: People who wash our dishes, bus our tables, serve us food in restaurants depend on food banks to help feed their families.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: People who care for our elders, our disabled – our health care aides – can't afford health insurance.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: Children of child care workers can't afford college.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: Many CEOs make more in a year than workers make in a lifetime.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: Some people are paid so little their children go without necessities while other people are paid so much their grandchildren could live in luxury without having to work at all.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: Congress cuts taxes at the top when the richest 400 Americans have as much wealth as the 50 million households at the bottom.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: Corporations violate worker rights and get rich off poverty wages whether in the United States, Mexico, China or anywhere else.

There's something fundamentally wrong when: The minimum wage keeps people in poverty instead of out of poverty. (Adapted, JMW 56)

You would have thought we had learned our lesson when in the gilded age outrageous wealth clashed with desperate poverty. But we approach those days again.

It's ironic that Americans will watch hour upon hour of news coverage of the attempts to rescue one child from a well. Earnest prayers will be on many lips. Teddy bears and gifts will flow in as the whole nation awaits the rescue. Yet we same "compassionate" Americans don't seem to notice the millions of poor children among us, suffering a slow, and sometimes not so slow, death every minute of day. It's like a cancer whose symptoms we ignore, while we are hyper-sensitive to a sudden break in a limb. So we Americans live with a cancer in our midst that causes a degree of ever-increasing suffering that we largely deny.

You know the picture is ugly. I'm not telling you much if anything that's new this morning. Some of us in this congregation confront this ugliness daily in our own life struggle to make ends meet, or in the lives of people we work with. But many of us are insulated from this ugliness. Not that it's not in front of our faces, but that most of the time we avoid looking at it.

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I suggest that if you really want to put a face on the statistics I've been relaying to you – if you want to get to the personal stories behind this indecency, just look around you. Volunteer some time at the Boys and Girls Club, at the Huntington Food Council, with HiHi. Spend some time at the Dolan Health Center. But talk with people there. Talk with the people who bus our tables, care for our elders, clerk our groceries and on and on. Get to know their stories. Put individual faces and lives to the statistics.

Today Unitarian Universalists across the United States join in observing “Justice Sunday” with a focus on “The Living Wage Campaign.” So UUs in White Bear, Minnesota, Palos Verdes, California, Little Rock, Arkansas, Lawrence, Kansas, San Antonio, Texas and Holton, Maine – UUs all across America are lighting the chalice with words that call us to justice-making, listening and discussing ways to live our 2nd principle of “justice, equity and compassion in the human relations.” It's good to remember that we are not doing this only in Huntington. Moreover our Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee have joined the coalition of the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign, which brings together more than fifty faith-based and community-based organizations, including the National Council of Churches, the Union of Reform Judaism, and the American Friends Service Committee among many others.

The immediate focus is to support Senator Edward Kennedy's bill to raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 in a little over two years. You can do this through the web at www.letjusticeroll.org. Although this bill was defeated last October, the issue is not going away. No increase in the minimum wage means conditions will only worsen. Perhaps the changing political climate will become favorable for an increase. But I've got to tell you that raising it to \$7.25 is a paltry goal. That increase would mean a lot to those who are currently at the very bottom – an additional \$4,370 a year, which is what the increase would mean for a full time worker at the new minimum wage. In many parts of the country it would go a long way toward rent. It would pay a year's tuition at a county college. All that is good, but a person would be working full time, and still earn less than what our government defines as poverty!

Many communities have passed their own living wage, much higher than the proposed federal level, and they have pegged the wage to inflation – cities like San Francisco and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Our own Suffolk County legislature requires the companies it contracts with to meet a living wage - \$9.64 with health benefits, and \$10.98 without. Although I note that they lowered the level for child care workers. Might that be because the county is unwilling to increase their grants to the child care agencies they contract with? Another case of “unfunded mandates”? We have our work cut out for us.

Yesterday, March 25th, was the anniversary of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory Fire in 1911. 146, mostly young women and girls lost their lives because the owners had locked them onto the sweatshop factory floors of the ten story building. The fire started on the 8th floor. They had no escape; some jumped to their death out windows and down elevator shafts. The searing images of their bodies shocked America into supporting changes in labor law. The song that we are about to sing grew out of the labor movement for decent wages for women.

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I pray that today, we will not need a tragedy of comparable scope to move us into reversing the economic injustice that takes its toll ever more severely over these past decades of widening inequity. I pray that we will recognize the silent killer among us that preys especially on women and children. I pray that we will know what's going on, and agitate for the changes that will set this country back on a course that truly honors the work of all its workers with a living wage. I pray that we will once again move toward aligning our work ethic with our wage ethic.