

The Great Central American Posada

by Cliff DuRand

Here in Mexico during the eight days leading up to Christmas, there are daily posadas in every neighborhood. Remembering the trek of Joseph and Mary, people of all ages join processions going house to house looking for shelter. They are turned away again and again until finally a humble family gives them a place to stay for the night. Then the children break a piñata and the community celebrates. It is a lovely tradition that goes back centuries.

Last month we witnessed the great Central American posada through Mexico. As it made its way northward toward what used to be called “the land of opportunity”, its desperate people were welcomed and helped on their way, even by the poorest who shared what little they had with those strangers in need, giving them beans and tortillas. Many of us expats here in San Miguel, more fortunate than most, also helped with food, clothing and money. They knocked on our doors and, unlike in the traditional posadas, we responded with generosity. But when they finally arrived at their destination and knocked on the door of the richest man’s house, they found it locked tight. Their pleas for compassion, for normal human sympathy were met with insults from his stone cold heart – insults and tear gas.

While the rich man blocked their entry, inside the house there were many who wanted a more compassionate response. They were moved by a recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That language is familiar to us Unitarian Universalists. It is one of the core principles of our religion. But beyond that, it is a universal principle recognized as an essential precondition for a peaceful society and for the free development of all. That aspirational principle is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This past week marked the 70th anniversary of the adoption of this historic document by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948. This noble resolution was born of the horrors of the previous decades of war and tyranny that brought suffering and death to millions. As the Preamble acknowledges “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind.” That dark time taught an essential lesson to a generation, a lesson about what is required for a civilized society. It is a lesson that we still carry in our hearts today, but which we are now relearning as we witness the gross violations of human rights at our nation’s border. The great Central American posada is teaching us again what it means to be human.

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” That right is guaranteed in international law as well as in U.S. law. If our government were ruled by law, the refugees would be welcomed and given sanctuary. Rather than being demonized, their inherent worth and dignity would be recognized. Most of our fellow citizens do recognize that as also do Mexican citizens. To not recognize it would only demean us.

Let me mention some other provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 25 speaks of the right of everyone “to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.” Article 23 asserts “the right to work” with a “just and favorable remuneration.” In a society where these rights are not observed, as is the case in much of Central America (not to mention many other countries), or where the law does not protect one against “arbitrary interference with ... privacy, family, [or] home” (Article 12) as is the case in the face of gang violence, then one may well exercise the Article 13 “right to leave [one’s own] country,” seeking asylum elsewhere. There are some who assert that a refugee is entitled to asylum only from direct persecution by his government. But even when the danger that causes one to flee comes from other sources, e.g. gangs or domestic abuse or even economic deprivation, and one’s government fails to protect its citizens, then it is complicit. For as Article 3 says, “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

One final point from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is relevant here. In several places it speaks of “the full development of the human personality” (Articles 26 and 22). Beyond ensuring the basic right to life, liberty and security, everyone has the right to the free development of his/her human capacities. This is the basis for the right to education. It is declared that education “shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations” (Article 26), thereby promoting peace. For a universal recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone would usher in a new era of brotherhood. (Article 1)

In these dark times, the Great Central American posada is awakening our conscience and teaching us what it means to live in a human society. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights expresses what an earlier generation learned 70 years ago. We are now challenged to learn those lessons again. In the cause of human rights we might demand that our nation’s door be opened to refugees and other migrants yearning to breath free. Or to paraphrase a former leader whom I seldom quote, “Mr. President, tear down that wall!”