



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

One at a Time

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October 16, 2016

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The Low Road, A poem by Marge Piercy

What can they do to you?
They can do anything you can't stop them from doing.
How can you stop them?
Alone, you can fight, you can refuse, but they roll over you.
But two people fighting back to back can cut through a mob,
an army can meet an army.
Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.
With four you can play bridge and start an organization.
With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a
fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.
It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again and they said no,
it starts when you say We and know who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.

As an eighth grader in New York City, Artemis Joukowsky III chose his grandmother Martha Sharp to interview for a school assignment. "What will you do with your life that is important?" she asked him.

The story of what she chose to do would change his life, as it had hers.

In February 1939, Artemis' grandmother Martha and her husband Waitstill left behind their two children and the congregation at the Unitarian Church of Wellesley Hills, where Waitstill served as minister. Just a month earlier, Waitstill had received a call from the Rev. Everett Baker, vice president of the American Unitarian Association, asking if they would travel to Prague to help provide safe passage to the thousands of people targeted by Nazi persecution, Jews, political dissidents, intellectuals and artists. Seventeen ministers had already turned Baker down, but the Sharps were compelled to say yes.

The next month, Martha and Waitstill arrived in Prague, site of the world's largest Unitarian church, which was also a central spoke in the city's Nazi resistance. In Prague, using their American credentials the Sharps helped arrange exit visas and humanitarian aid as the Nazis invaded. Perhaps most daringly, Martha herself staged the dangerous rescue of Lion

Feuchtwanger, a prominent German novelist who was on the Nazis' most-wanted list, and smuggled him into the United States.

During the course of World War II, the Sharps traveled back and forth to Europe to continue their humanitarian work. They spent most of 1940 in France, helping to save the lives of hundreds of people and over 30 children. Their efforts led to the founding of the Unitarian Service Committee, the forerunner of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. For Martha's grandson Artemis, so taken by the story as he first heard it, the important work of his life has included piecing his grandmother's story together and sharing it widely. In 2013, Joukowsky directed and co-produced a documentary film, *Two Who Dared: The Sharps' War*, to bring their story to life. On September 20, Joukowsky co-produced another film, *Defying Hate: The Sharps' War*, this time in partnership with PBS and the documentarian Ken Burns.

Joukowsky, active in his Unitarian Universalist church in Massachusetts, shares his grandparents work to inspire more acts of risk-taking and "daring" on behalf of others. "Life is made of righteous moments, not grandiose moments," he says, "Making choices where you reflect on how you treat everyone in your life. The key part about my grandparents wasn't just one big moment. They made thousands of little choices that led up to the story that we now tell."

In 2006, the Sharps were two of five Americans named "Righteous Among the Nations," *Hasidei umot haolam* at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust museum and memorial. The honor is given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust, when every Jewish life was the target for extermination. The history of the "righteous gentiles" goes back to early biblical times, members of non-Israelite tribes who treated Israelites with kindness and recognized the commandments of Jewish law. To give you some sense of how shockingly few Americans were involved in the Holocaust, out of over 26,000 people having been conferred the honor worldwide, only five have been American.

In English, the word *righteous* implies moral and ethical virtue. In Hebrew, the translated word *hasidei* comes from the word *hesed*, meaning goodness or kindness. The act of rescuing, regardless of the outcome, is a righteous act in itself, in fact the attempt to preserve a human life overrides almost every religious law. When a person's life is risked in order to rescue another and the outcome of the rescue is a life saved, it is all the more virtuous. The Talmud teaches: "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

Not unlike other parallels in the Abrahamic scriptures, the Qur'an has a very similar saying: "Whoever saves one life, saves all of humanity."

This week, Time magazine ran its cover story about a modern day band of righteous rescuers, the White Helmets. Before the war turned their cities to rubble, the White Helmets, named for the hard hats they wear, were ordinary Syrians, teachers and tailors, firefighters and salesmen. Now, they spend their days combing their way through the metal and concrete, never giving

up hope of finding life, and once they have found it, saving it. They rescue for the sake of rescuing, knowing that the dead will outnumber the living. And they save lives, 60,000 lives, to be precise. In attempt to rescue these 60,000, only 140 White Helmets have perished. The White Helmets take their mission from the Qur'an. "Whoever saves one life, saves all of humanity."

After the tenuous cease fire negotiated by the US and Russia disintegrated, the assault on Aleppo has only intensified, at the end of September there were nearly 1700 airstrikes in only 8 days. The strikes are brutal and deliberate, targeting every hospital, residential area and civic infrastructure. The intention—to drive out, or exterminate, every remaining life, the very definition of a holocaust, visible to all but seemingly powerless for any world power to stop it. How do these White Helmets continue to maintain the hope, against all odds, that each and every life is worth saving?

Michael Kimmelman has a striking piece in Friday's New York Times. He speaks to the difficulty of interpreting the footage of Aleppo's destruction, taken from the cruel and depersonalized perspective of a drone. To us, we see only abandoned shells of a city, indiscernible structures made uniform in color by the dusty plaster. But to people like the White Helmets, he writes:

This used to be a neighborhood. A neighborhood is more than an assortment of buildings and streets. It is life, shared and rooted in place, passed down through generations — nowhere more so than in an ancient city like Aleppo, where some years ago I was taken to the home of a man who lived on a street that bore his family name.

"How long has your family lived here?" I asked him.

"On the street or in Aleppo?" he replied.

Before I could answer, he told me: "On the street, 800 years. In Aleppo, 1,200."

Communities incubate hope. Extinguishing this is the goal of mass murderers and tyrants.

From Berlin to Grozny to Aleppo the horror of repeats itself, accompanied by the West's paralyzing feelings of powerlessness. Through the power of technology we cannot pretend we do not see, though willingness to face the true depth of the brutal destruction puts our safety and comfort at no risk. From afar, we may think we can only bear witness, hovering above with the distance of a drone. Might we too join the ranks of the righteous and dare to save what life is left. It starts with cultivating that fierce orientation towards hope that we pass through the generations, a hope that Martha and Waitstill passed on to their grandson who passes their story on to inspire us today.

Czech statesman and political dissident Vaclav Havel puts it this way:

Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not dependent on some observation of the world. Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an

orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond the horizons.

The number of people displaced by the conflicts in Syria numbers over 6.5 million. The average refugee spends 17 years in a camp before they are permanently settled. Here on the home front, after the mandatory two-year waiting period is complete, hundreds of Syrian refugees will arrive in the Los Angeles area by Christmas. Los Angeles has one of the largest Syrian populations in the country and is the ideal place for resettlement efforts.

Supported by the Immigration and Refugee Services of the Episcopal Diocese, Neighborhood Church is one of three Los Angeles congregations participating in a pilot program sponsoring a Syrian refugee family who, after two years in Jordan, is settling into a new home in Azusa. Led by a stalwart and generous collective of committed volunteers, Neighborhood Church has supported a family of five, providing furnishings, rides, food, clothing and supplies for the parents and their twin five year old girls and infant son. To protect their privacy, I'll call them the Z family.

From school enrollment and homework preparation, private English lessons to navigating the endless red tape of the immigration system, our members have worked tirelessly to make the Z family feel the hospitality and welcome of our community, and help link them with other established Syrian families in the area. It is truly been a remarkable effort of which this congregation should be very proud. You will hear stories of the project on November 6th.

We now are about to conclude the first three months of our formal partnership with this particular family, but the needs of the Z family, and countless others like them continue. We can continue to be a part of efforts to help those who have survived thrive on new ground, and to help the larger diaspora of the Syrian refugee community.

In August, I received an email from Lena Alfi, a young woman who grew up a part of the well-established Syrian community here in Pasadena. Lena's family and other members of the local Syrian community felt helpless as the humanitarian situation continued to worsen each day. They wanted to do something. Her cousin Lilac Atassi, a classically trained pianist, volunteered to bring her network of musicians together for a concert and wanted to do it at the church. On Sunday, September 18th, the church hosted a benefit for the Middle East Children's institute, Lena's organization, which provides healing educational services to Syrian refugee children in Jordan. At our invitation, the whole Z family was able to attend.

The night was filled with exquisite classical music and the remarkable company of the local Syrian and Muslim community. Supplemented by over \$2,000 from our morning offering, an incredibly generous \$20,000 was raised for the cause of educating refugee children, which will fund a school for 300 children for two years. For me, the best moment of the night was witnessing the instant connection between Lena's mother, a long time and established Pasadenan, and the Z family's mother, only two months in her strange new home after two

years in Jordan. Unbelievably, they came from the same Syrian village of Homs. One connection at a time, one kind act at a time, the Z family is building a new life here.

Remember the words of Marge Piercy's poem:

It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again and they said no,
it starts when you say We and know who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.

There are the righteous among us, those who refuse to let go of hope. Let us pledge, each in our own way, to join the ranks of the righteous, to love kindness and mercy. Let us remember that all lives are worthy of being saved, and to save one life is to save the world.