

**UUMA/CSW Worship Service
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The Long Reach: Some Thoughts on Globalization

by Alison Cornish

Background: This sermon won the 2002 UUMA/CSW SAI Sermon Contest. The winner of this contest is awarded a cash prize and has the opportunity to deliver his or her sermon at General Assembly. Accordingly, Alison M. Cornish delivered her sermon at General Assembly on Monday, June 24, 2002.

Back in the summer of 1964, our family did what thousands of other families did that hot summer.

We packed ourselves into our (American made) station wagon, and headed down the (much vaunted new) interstate to visit the New York World's Fair. There's much about that trip that I don't fully remember, but one memory stands out vividly. As we walked through the fairgrounds, I spied a building with a long, snaking line of people standing in the sun waiting to go inside. I don't remember any markings on the building that indicated what it was, but something made me want to go inside, too. My parents and older brother were reluctant to join a line that looked so interminable, but as a young child, let me tell you, I could be stubborn. I wasn't budging until we got on line ... and so we did.

Quite a while later, it was our turn to pass into the darkened interior. Inside, we climbed into small boats that floated on a waterway deep into the building. And suddenly we were in the exhibit - "It's A Small World" - along with what seemed to me like hundreds of doll-like figurines singing that song which has become so well known. I was entranced. The animatronic children, dressed in costumes of all the nations, moved and sang in several languages. Behind them were miniature scenes from around the world, like the Eiffel Tower and the North Pole. I was mesmerized! The ride was over far too soon for my taste, and I was ready to get back in line, and wait for my turn again. But my nearly adolescent brother muttered the 1960s equivalent of "gimmeabreak," and my parents, indulgent to my first demand, explained how much more there was to do and

see
at the fair. And so, off we went.

I don't know if it started with that moment, but I am a big fan of world's fairs. From the 1851 "Crystal Palace" in London, to the soaring space needle in Seattle, these fairs have celebrated the coming together of peoples, cultures, technology, manufacturing, art ... all aspects of human activity of this small world. The 1964 World's Fair opened in the midst of the global Cold War - in fact, most of the communist bloc boycotted it. It was U.S. industry, led by General Electric, Ford, IBM, U.S. Steel and others that spent lavishly, erecting handsome pavilions and loading them with entertainment that they hoped would boost their images with consumers. In all, more than a billion dollars was invested in that one fair. It wasn't until years later that I learned more about "It's a Small World"-it was a groundbreaking exhibit for Disney's new technologies - the cost of which had been underwritten by Pepsi-Cola - AND the proceeds were earmarked for UNICEF.

So, in the midst of the Cold War, on a former ashdump-turned-park in Queens, New York - there were many of the ingredients of what we are struggling to describe, to understand, to respond to, and to participate in today - this thing called globalization. That fair combined transnational corporations; big-time investment dollars; the growing industries of entertainment, information and technology; with just a smattering of world government and human rights. In fact, the single exhibit - "It's a Small World" contained most of those elements provided by Pepsi, Disney and the UN. This background is good to remember this morning as we explore some of the challenges and opportunities of globalization, that word that so easily rolls off our tongues now. But as familiar as the word now is to our ears, what does it really mean?

Let's start with this definition, from John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO - he says "Globalization refers to the process of creating a unified global economy through the breaking down of barriers between national economies. It is a process that is driven both by the

imperatives of the market and by the actions of policy makers." Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist, and author of the widely read book "The Lexus and the Olive Tree - Understanding Globalization," suggests that we are currently undergoing the latest of several eras of globalization. But this era, begun just a couple of decades ago, is new in the "degree and intensity with which the world is being tied together into a single globalized marketplace" and now constitutes the dominant international system. And James Skillen, writing for the Center for Public Justice, calls globalization simply the "growing interdependence of people throughout the world."

What all these writers - and many more - seem to agree on is this: starting in the middle of the last century, but accelerating mightily since the end of the Cold War, there has been a global trend of integrating economic markets with sovereign nation-states, fast-moving technology and free-market capitalism. This has been accompanied by the movement of the United States into the position of the sole and dominant superpower and an unprecedented power and portability of money. So this is what has inspired the authors of our 2001-2003 Study Action Issue, entitled "Economic Globalization," to pose this question: "How can Unitarian Universalists respond to the unprecedented opportunities and potentially dangerous environmental, political, and quality-of-life challenges accompanying economic globalization?" How indeed ... do we respond to the strains of "it's a small world, after all" by applying our Unitarian Universalist theology, principles and values?

This morning, we can of course only scratch the surface of this concept of globalization - remember, the subtitle of this sermon is "some thoughts on globalization." In preparing these thoughts, I've come to understand that it is important to take the time to delve into the vast literature on the subject written from a number of different points of view, including the economic, as our study-action issue suggests - but also to look at globalization from political, cultural, environmental and spiritual angles. And I have found value in reading both the traditional

- or

conservative - viewpoint as well as more progressive - or liberal - approaches. The story of globalization is too large to be captured by any one person, or point of view. So one of the challenges - and opportunities - in looking at globalization involves resisting views that are too narrow or two-dimensional. Think - broad and rounded. Think - the globe.

And we need to explore the subject knowing that there is no one answer, or bottom line, or straight path through this system, but instead we need to seek to understand the forces at work, and how they act in this global environment. This thing called globalization, our increasing interdependence, is emerging and changing shape by the day. This is happening so quickly, according to one author, that "nothing matters so much as what will come next, and what will come next can only arrive if what is here now gets overturned. Innovation replaces tradition. The present - or perhaps the future - replaces the past." Our ideas of permanence, security, and tradition, are being challenged. It is becoming clearer that understanding process, rather than fixed solutions or goals, is taking on new significance. So another challenge - and opportunity - involves balancing the innovation and rapid pace of globalization with our need for stability.

If we investigate the subject broadly, we will also see that globalization and Americanization are often viewed as synonymous. Not only does the United States represent the largest, freest capitalist force on the globe, but also the most sophisticated purveyor of "culture," including popular music, entertainment, advertising and media. Americans have grown quite comfortable with a "long reach," which includes influencing markets and cultures far from our home. Americans are, without a doubt, among those who most robustly benefit from globalization. And even though Americans are also known for generosity in aiding the democratization of other countries, and extending foreign aid assistance, we are also often at a distance from those who pay the costs for our benefits. So a challenge - and opportunity - especially for Americans is this -

given the great blessings of our country - which is so well positioned to reap benefits in this new global era - how do we make sure that our "long reach" results in the right touch? And how do we also reach out to those in our own land who are not benefiting from the forces of globalization, as we watch inequities grow there? How do we, as our Unitarian Universalist principle calls us, promote "justice, equity and compassion in human relations" in a single globalized marketplace?

And when we really look deeply into the literature that describes economic globalization from different points of view, we find that there is an ongoing argument about the nature of what we know as "financial markets." On the one hand, some say that the world's markets tend toward equilibrium - that they are, as a whole, a mechanistic, autonomous and neutral sector. But others, including George Soros, counter that the world of finance is not a "neutral sector" at all - that economies, and markets, are not autonomous, self-contained mechanisms. The struggle here is about far more than semantics - it is even about more than financial markets. It is about the very nature of reality. According to economist Bob Goudzwaard, this struggle, which is cast as a discussion about economics is really about how we view the world and our place in it. Goudzwaard says, "[when we teach] people to think and act in terms of a supposedly well-functioning machine - the market mechanism, the democratic mechanism, and the mechanisms of various social, political, and industrial plans - [we] leave out all questions of responsibilities for the outcomes. The system - the machinery - supposedly produces outcomes automatically." In other words, if our view of the world is overly mechanistic, we exclude ourselves as players able to influence the present - and the future. In fact, this is a view of the world not unlike that of a passenger in a small boat, observing the mechanical motion of figurines in an exhibit. We don't participate - we only watch, mesmerized.

We know that this is not how we want to be in this world. But in order to accept responsibility

for outcomes, we need to feel empowered. More than one writer speaks to the forces of globalization as disempowering, even dehumanizing. It is the very nature of globalization that it can disempower as easily and quickly as it can empower - sometimes, in the matter of minutes.

For example, vast sums of money are available to "surf" the globe for the best exchange or investment opportunity - but the cash moves - quickly - if things go awry. Empower. Disempower.

Transnational corporations take advantage of trade agreements to locate their operations in the countries most receptive to their needs, but often with devastating effects on human rights and the environment. Meanwhile, global communication via e-mail and the Internet allows an international crew of activists to band together to fight corporate greed and environmental plunder. Empower - disempower - and re-empower?

Market forces create incentives for many developing countries to become more sophisticated in their political and financial systems, thus curbing corruption and patronage, but, at the same time, those newly opened countries are now susceptible to the global economic forces from which they were formerly insulated. Power. Powerless. And so on ... with the nature of globalization what it is, it is hard for us as individuals - even as communities and nations - to feel empowered to take action.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the issues represented by globalization, which, I think, is what prompts many of us to say, "this really doesn't have anything to do with me. I'm not a financier, I don't own a dot com, and I only use my computer for e-mail and on-line shopping." But I am convinced that the forces of globalization really do reach out and touch everyone and everything on this good Earth, and to say that anyone - or anywhere - is beyond their reach, or protected, or immune, is unrealistic. We are a part of the interdependent web of all existence. Globalization is proving the truth of our seventh principle.

Besides thinking we may be untouched by the forces of globalization, there are other ways we ignore its real effects - either by being so entranced by the benefits that we forget to look broadly and deeply at its costs - or by being so suspicious that we reject anything that seems "global" out of hand. Above all, globalization calls us to reject thinking in dualisms of good/bad, yes/no, us/them. In fact, even the duality implied by the slogan "think globally, act locally" needs major restructuring - what's local? What's global? We are being called to think in truly different ways about how we live our lives on this planet, in ways that recognize our interdependence and the benefits - even necessity - of cooperation.

I do believe that there are ways for Unitarian Universalists to chart a course of action and interaction with the forces of globalization. And while these emerge from what I think of as Unitarian Universalist theology, principles and values, I believe that many of the world's religious traditions could articulate similar approaches.

The first point, I believe, involves our view of the possibilities of change. It is true that there are many aspects of globalization that are creating change too quickly - what Friedman refers to "turbo-evolution" - and evidenced by our news filled with reports of rainforest destruction, global warming, and unchecked consumption of fossil fuels. All of these seem to point to a rapid decline in our ability to preserve our Earth as our habitat. But our Unitarian Universalist theology teaches us that our destiny is not pre-determined. There are stories of remarkable achievement that have occurred because of the forces of globalization - stories of cooperation and progress where there was once staunch independence and closed doors. Our own theology emphasizes openness to transformation and innovation - and that beliefs and actions based in our commitment to loving and mutual relationships can and do transform the world. It is a challenge to live our theology in a culture so focused on a materialism that seems to be devastating its own environment. But if we view life as an unfolding process, one that does not have a predetermined outcome, but is shaped instead by our beliefs and actions, then we might even find a kinship with some of the breathtaking creativity and innovation that characterizes this era.

Globalization also challenges our ability to have compassion for others. There is a facelessness and impersonal quality to the forces of globalization that is hard to penetrate. But we need not accept this as a barrier to relationships with others. The Internet is a perfect example of both the opportunity and challenge of this double-edged sword. We can now meet - and communicate - with people from all over the world, making connections to people beyond our dreams. But this alone does not create connection. We can also hide behind our monitors, reducing others' life stories to the pixels on our screens, and forgetting about those who need our help right in our own communities. Using "fair trade" coffee, or filling your "Guest at Your Table" boxes, or helping to build a Habitat house - these are ways to make connections, and to extend our compassion and help to create a more just world. As a people with a long history of beneficence, we need to challenge ourselves and others to seize opportunities to stay connected through the anonymity and distance of a global economy.

Finally, we need to claim our own power to make decisions about how we want to be in this emerging world. We cannot allow a mechanistic view of institutions and systems to dominate, and absolve us from responsibility - or seduce us into thinking there's nothing we can do. We can do a lot - we can learn more about the products we spend money on - we can draw a line when we have enough "stuff" - we can establish goals for ourselves that are not financial, but instead serve the needs of the world. Power can be a positive force for good in our world - especially when it helps liberate us from seeing ourselves as mere observers, rather than participants, in destiny.

As I prepared this morning's service, reading and researching and reading some more, there were more than a few times when I wished that I was once again that little girl, riding in a boat, entranced by the dolls in that long-ago exhibit - "It's a Small World." How wonderful it would be, I thought, to turn the clock back and again receive the gift of Disney's magic. How much easier it would be than facing the complexities of today's world. But then I remember the

end

of that anecdote - my parents taking me by the hand, leading me on, because "there was so much else to see and do." It is time to get out of the boat, and realize that the small world those figures sang of is here, now.