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All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church
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“Global Economy: UN Sunday”

Just because you believe in evolution doesn't mean you have to like it. In fact, it's a little hard to be in favor of evolution in practice. I mean, it's all very well to suppose that Darwin got it right in his speculations about natural selection and adaptation and so on, but the reality of extinction makes the non-biologists among us very uneasy. We tend to like the variety that arises when chance variations in genetic qualities serve to enhance reproductive success, and create new kinds of creatures, adapted to previously unoccupied environmental niches. We are less comfortable when shifting environmental pressures set the stage for reproductive failure, and the eventual elimination of a particular type of creatures. Nevertheless, that's the nature of the game; the same processes that bring things into being also destroy them, with none of our human sentiment or compunction.

People who don't like the idea of evolution prefer to think that this process must necessarily be intentional; since nothing emerges out of nothing, they argue, there must be a deliberate intelligence behind the creation of life in its manifold varieties. There is too much intricacy of design for it to be possible that the whole biosphere has arisen by chance and natural law; **something** conscious must be running this show, something with a desire behind it. They simply don't accept that anything so complex could be self-organizing.

Now liberals and progressives are known to be scornful of folks who can't, or won't, wrap their minds around the self-organizing, emergent nature of biological complexity. Yes, we say, it **is** wonderful, and amazing, and awesome, but we know in principle how it works. We can only **make** it happen in the crudest of ways, and as I mentioned, we don't always like the results when it does operate, but that doesn't make it any less real. And like every other process in nature, in order to be commanded, or manipulated, it must be understood, and obeyed.

It has long puzzled me why the same liberal thinkers who take the self-organized complexity of the natural ecosystem for granted, become dogmatic intelligent design theorists when it comes to understanding the human economic system. As Stewart Kaufmann suggests in the reading we heard a few moments ago, both the economy specifically, and human civilization and culture in general, are self-organizing, co-constructing processes, operating on principles much like those which govern the same kind of creative and destructive forces in the natural world. We who affirm that the development of sexual reproduction or the opposable thumb can be the result of entirely natural forces, unguided by conscious intention, should be able to understand markets and currencies as a similar kind of spontaneous, emergent order.

Human communities have a long history of experimentation with using the principles of evolution to serve our own goals. The Chihuahua and the St. Bernard, the tasteless grocery store tomato and the forty pound turkey, as well as Seabiscuit and Secretariat, are all the products of our intentional intervention into the process of natural selection. For centuries, plant and animal breeders have subverted the randomness of nature, to select for qualities that would be advantageous or desirable to a human agenda. In addition to producing crops and creatures whose existence we now take for granted, this quest has also led us down some blind alleys. Not every experiment we try is successful, precisely because the world of nature operates according to laws that we must discover, rather than impose. We may deplore the complexity or intractability of these facts; we may even find their results tragic, but our feelings about them do not make them any less real.

On this Sunday, when we celebrate the existence and accomplishments of the United Nations, I want to suggest that we

might all, for a few moments, bracket our anxious perception of economic forces as manifestations of corrupt human intent, and consider the possibilities that open up if we begin to think about the world economy as a self-organizing, co-creating, emergent process, that is neither good nor evil in itself, but governed by rules that it is possible for us at least partially to understand, and sometimes even to bend to our own purposes. It seems to me that such thinking is going to be essential to envisioning and creating the future of the UN, especially if I am remotely correct about the following.

Because here's the thing: I really wonder whether we may be living in some of the last days of the nation-state as a global organizing principle. Consider the tax havens of Monaco, Hong Kong, and the Cayman Islands. Consider Alaskan cruise ships registered in Panama and the Netherlands. Consider the Ebola virus, the emerald ash borer, the Asian flying carp. Consider e-mail, and Facebook, and I Phones. Consider Al Qaeda, NATO, drug cartels. Consider WalMart, Exxon, Samsung. Consider World Cup Soccer, Michael Jackson, Lady Gaga, Harry Potter. I submit that most of the things that matter to us, that have impact on our lives, that we worry about in the 21st century, are largely indifferent to national borders.

It may help to remember that the nation-state itself is a product of human cultural evolution, and has only been the dominant form of social and political organization for six or seven centuries. Earlier alternatives include the tribe, the village, the city state, the empire, and the religious community, all of which still can still be found in traces throughout the contemporary world. Some historians date the emergence of nation-states to the treaties which constituted the Peace of Westphalia, ending wars of several decades' duration in Europe in 1648. Others claim that the growth of literacy following the development of the printing press enabled the standardization of a

national language, which gave rise to the popular sentiment of nationalism, a concept which was exported around the globe by European colonialism. This is a fascinating anthropological question, but the fact remains that the nation as a political unit is not an inevitable feature of human social organization. Possibly it is a necessary phase of our species' collective evolution; maybe even the essential precondition for the emergence of democracy – I would entertain that argument, anyway. But the two things that nation-states were good at – military defense of geographical borders, and colonial expansion – are fast losing their importance, or even their feasibility, as the third millennium starts to unfold. I see no reason to think that it could not eventually become a historical anachronism, like the Viking raiders or the Holy Roman empire.

Indeed, you might say that I was raised to think that, by my Unitarian Universalist upbringing. Our current UU Purposes and Principles call us to affirm and promote: “The goal of world community, with liberty and justice for all.” When I was a child, we didn't pay as much attention to the then-current statement, but it included the purpose: “To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice, and peace.” This religion has always taught me that my global citizenship is more significant than my national identity, and I believe that. This is one of the reasons why the United Nations has always had for many of us the character of a sacred enterprise; because it is dedicated to precisely that vision of a unified world community, in which all people participate, and none are privileged.

Now I'm no Nate Silver, but what I do know about prognostications of the future is that they are notoriously subject to surprise developments that no one saw coming. As one science fiction writer observed, “People had been imagining a future in which human beings would

one day walk on the moon for centuries. What no one remotely foresaw was that millions of people would watch it happen on television.” Which of those realities, the foreseen or the unforeseen, has more significantly shaped the human condition in the present era?

So, allowing always for the wild card of surprise, which is sure to be played in one way or another, here’s my speculation. If we are indeed at the end of the era of nation-states as the organizational structures of an ever more tightly knit global society, might we already be seeing the emergence of the multi-national corporation, for which the geographical boundaries of any map are all but meaningless, as the next locus of actual world power? And if that were to be even partly true, what does it imply for the future existence and function of the United Nations? Or, to turn the question around, what might the UN do to prepare for a world in which decisions made by the CEOs of Coke and Shell Oil have more practical impact on people than tin pot tyrants, dead locked congresses, ceremonial royalty, and overworked bureaucrats?

Here’s where I think we need to hang on to the evolution metaphor. Denouncing it as inherently immoral because we don’t like some part of how it operates only makes us cranky, ignorant, and ultimately irrelevant, just like the advocates of Creationism. While there is no doubt in my mind that such a thing as economic violence exists, and it causes needless suffering, and it’s bad, I still believe that it is an evolutionary step ahead of ballistic missiles and land mines. Moreover, rational people do not randomly destroy their own economic interests; if those interests are global, so will be their preference for public order and functional consumers all over the earth. As the philosopher Edmund Burke once pointed out, the first requirement of reason is peace.

Something like this line of thought may have been in Secretary General Kofi Annan's mind when he addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1999. The day of national pride and national power is waning; the people whose moral covenant with one another will determine our future well-being are not the world's princes and prime ministers, but the executive officers and board chairs of the corporations who want us to buy their products. And they, no less than the kings and presidents who preceded them, are human beings, and are ethically persuadable. Moreover, they need our collective ongoing practical assent more than elected leaders ever did, no matter how fast the election cycle. How can we use the stature of the United Nations as a form of world conscience to create a new standard for corporate accountability – not just to shareholders, but to the global commonwealth; the whole business community, and all earth's citizens? It seems to me that this matters, because if those of us who have so long advocated for the goal of one, unified world write off corporate power as inherently evil, and it turns out to be the next evolutionary phase of global culture, we will have cut ourselves off from the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the shaping of that era. We will be left behind sulking, and that would be a sad fate for the heirs of the mighty Enlightenment.

So what did Kofi Annan ask the world's commercial leaders to commit to? What might constitute a preliminary sketch of a responsible global corporate citizen? Or, to put it another way, what should we be breeding for, as we seek to select for the kind of business leadership that will meet human needs in the coming century? According to the provisions of the United Nations Global Compact, it's really not that hard. It asks those companies who want to identify themselves as adherents of the Global Compact to commit to ten principles; here's what they are:

Businesses should support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights; and make sure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses.

Businesses should uphold:

- the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labor;
- the effective abolition of child labor; and
- the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Businesses should support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges;

- undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility; and
- encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies.

Businesses should work against corruption in all its forms, including extortion and bribery.

Pretty straightforward, right? Don't abuse people's human rights, don't do bribes. Pay attention to the environment. Don't use slaves or child labor, and let people have unions if they want them. It's not rocket science. It's not the moral high ground, really; it's the basement. It's the least you can do. But picture a world in which we the people, the consuming public, held all the companies that want our business to this standard; wouldn't that be something? And by the way, it's not just the company itself; part of the Compact is that you hold your suppliers and subcontractors to these same minimal standards. But here's the thing: imagine how much time and energy

and labor and money and anguish would go into trying to get these simple requirements passed into political legislation in every nation of the world. Can you envision the cacophony of mutually contradictory laws that would result, even if the Herculean task could be performed at all? Yet how simple for the corporate community itself, and we, its customers, to adopt these expectations of one another. Will people and companies try to game the system? Of course they will. But the grapevine in the global village is getting denser and denser all the time; it's hard to hide the truth for long, if the public as a whole cares.

And that's where we come in, my friends. We don't get to give speeches to the assembled leaders of the world economy – that's what the UN is for. But we do make decisions, every day of our lives, about how we are going to spend, and make, and invest our money. Who you work for matters. Who you buy from matters. Who you supply capital to matters. If you want to hang on to the conviction that capitalism is dangerous, and all multi-national corporations are wicked, so be it. What is important is to acknowledge that some of them are more wicked than others, and that our collective response to them constitutes their evolutionary success or failure.

Last Thursday I had the opportunity to attend a meeting with The Reverend Matthew Crebbin of Newtown Congregational Church and Rabbi Shaul Praver of Congregation Adath Israel in Newtown, Connecticut, two of the clergy who were with parents at the Sandy Hook firehouse in 2012 when they received the news that their children were among those who had been killed by a suicidal gunman. Together these two religious leaders helped pass common sense gun control laws in their state, and have been traveling the country, lobbying congress and other states to do the same. They were here in Kansas City, not to meet with lawmakers, but rather for quiet talks with leaders at Hallmark, to hear about their experiences of being

targeted by the NRA when they tried to establish a corporate policy to not allow guns in their stores. (As an irresistible aside, one of the things that I heard at this meeting, not altogether irrelevant to our topic, is that the National Rifle Association does not allow guns at *its* corporate headquarters! Seriously.) I think it is quite suggestive that how corporate America, with its commercial interest in the safety of its customers and employees, responds to the presence of guns, is as significant as the voting of legislatures, both to these two advocates, and to a lobby as intense as the NRA.

It's not impossible that the United Nations would eventually become as vestigial as the nation-states by which it was founded, and the world would have to create some other umbrella organization to mediate among the commercial powers of our evolving global culture – that could happen. But this might be a wheel that we don't need to re-invent, if our ideas are as adaptable as we have always claimed that homo sapiens are. Most of our inventions come to serve purposes different from what they were designed to do, precisely because we are endlessly creative and curious. If there is such a thing as a global conscience, surely the almost 70 years of work of the United Nations is one of its most visible manifestations. The UN Global Compact seeks to focus that ethical awareness on a world wide marketplace that could serve to make our lives peaceful, prosperous, and more and more interconnected -- or else exploited, inequitable, and more and more alienated. We have no way of knowing for sure; there are forces at work in the larger patterns of evolution and of history that we do not control, or even fully understand. Evolving, self-organizing, co-creating processes are never entirely predictable. The only intention that we can be sure of is our own; and therein lies our capacity to stake our powers of selection on the moral future we want for this world. If we should live to see the virtues and ethical challenges of the global

market, replace the virtues and ethical challenges of the battlefield, I for one would rejoice and be glad.

Let's lift our voices now in celebration of the planet that is our shared home, and our hope of living here together in peace.