

## “Darfur: How Can We Help?”

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### *1. What Is Happening?*

Just this week, the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for the arrest of the Sudanese president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir.

The charges have not yet been released but will likely include war crimes and genocide against the non-Arab people of Darfur.<sup>1</sup>

*Genocide* is a word you’ve probably heard many times to describe what’s happening in Darfur.

It triggers terrible memories of the Holocaust, and of the Rwandan genocide 15 years ago.

When we think of those terrible days, we think “Never again,” and yet it is happening again.

The least we can do is to try to understand why and ask if there is something we could do to help.

Darfur is part of the modern-day nation of Sudan, which is just south of Egypt.

It borders Chad to the west, as well as Libya and the Central African Republic.

The Darfur region is just a little bigger than California, and it has three main ethnic and cultural areas.

In the north, nomadic Arab people raise camels.

In the middle,

non-Arab farmers of several different tribes raise crops.

And in the south, Arabic-speaking nomads raise cattle.

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<sup>1</sup> Marlise Simons and Neil MacFarquhar, “Court Approves Warrant for Sudan’s President Bashir,” published online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/12/world/africa/12hague.html?ref=world>.

Most Darfuris, though not all, are Muslim.  
And the perceived ethnic differences among the three groups  
didn't use to be a big deal either.  
They used to be somewhat fluid,  
so that, for example, a non-Arab farmer might start raising cattle  
and be adopted into one of the Arab tribes.<sup>2</sup>

But Darfur is also a pretty dry place that's vulnerable to drought.  
And in the 1980s, there were years of droughts.  
Very quickly land in the northern and middle parts of Darfur,  
land which had been really good for camel-raising and crop-farming  
began to turn into desert.  
So the Arab people from the north began to move south  
looking for water and grazing land for their camels.  
But there wasn't enough for both them and the farmers.  
And, predictably, people started to fight.  
A low-level civil war went on for about 15 years.  
To this day, partly because of global climate change,  
there are still very serious water shortages.<sup>3</sup>

As if that weren't enough,  
back in the '80s, a rebel group formed in the south,  
made up mostly of Christians  
who wanted to replace the Arab Islamic government in Sudan  
with a secular, democratic government.<sup>4</sup>  
So the Sudanese government  
decided to give weapons to the Arab cattle farmers in the south  
to fight back against the rebels.  
Meanwhile the government started spreading racial hatred,  
encouraging Arab people to look down on the non-Arabs  
they used to get along with just fine.  
So you had drought and famine and low-level fighting

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<sup>2</sup> R. S. O'Fahey, "Darfur: A Complex Ethnic Reality with a Long History," *International Herald Tribune* May 15, 2004, available at [http://www.ihf.com/articles/2004/05/15/edofahey\\_ed3\\_.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/2004/05/15/edofahey_ed3_.php).

<sup>3</sup> "Climate Change Escalates Darfur Crisis," *Christian Science Monitor* July 27, 2007, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0727/p01s04-woaf.html?page=2>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.sudanupdate.org/WHOSWHO/SPLAM.HTM>.

between herders and farmers,  
and civil war between rebels and government-backed militias.  
Serious fighting started in February 2003, six years ago this month,  
when the rebels attacked a government garrison.<sup>5</sup>  
By September 2003, 65,000 Darfuris had crossed the border to Chad  
and become refugees,  
and another 500,000 people still in Darfur were in need of aid.<sup>6</sup>

And then those government-funded militias  
began to attack civilians,  
as the government turned a blind eye  
and let them know they could keep whatever they could capture.  
The name of those militias has become all too familiar to us:  
the Janjaweed.<sup>7</sup>  
The Janjaweed militias started attacking civilians in villages.  
For six years, they have been systematically raping women,  
burning villages to the ground,  
and killing thousands on thousands of people.  
To date, at least 300,000 Darfuris have died,  
and over 2.5 *million* people have become refugees.<sup>8</sup>  
Aid workers in Darfur say,  
they aren't sure how to help things get better politically.  
They really don't know what to do to bring peace back to this land.

And even in the refugee camps, life is not secure.  
Aid groups are having trouble bringing in supplies  
with all the violence around the camps.  
Food and water are scarce.  
It's hard to get medical care, or education,  
and there's not very much paying work in the camps,  
so a lot of people end up leaving the relative safety of the camps  
every day to find work in towns nearby.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7263663.stm>.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.un.org/News/dh/dev/scripts/darfur\\_formatted.htm](http://www.un.org/News/dh/dev/scripts/darfur_formatted.htm).

<sup>7</sup> See O'Fahey.

<sup>8</sup> Lydia Polgreen, "Attacks Pushing Darfur Refugees into Chad," *New York Times* February 11, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/11/world/africa/11darfur.html>.

Women and girls have to leave the camps  
to find firewood, too, and water,  
and when they do,  
many of them are attacked and raped by the militias  
that are still prowling around the camps.  
When I think of it, I can hardly imagine.

## *2. The Inner Journey: How Do We Live in a World of Suffering?*

And, to be honest, when I look at the situation,  
it is so discouraging that all the activists  
who have been sending emails and writing letters  
and marching and protesting for six years now  
still haven't managed to stop the violence—  
that, even with all our best efforts,  
people are still suffering and dying.  
I confess there are moments when I want to throw up my hands  
and say, I just don't want to know any more, you know?  
It's so painful to know these things are happening  
and not know how to stop them.

And, though of course our own frustration and sorrow  
are as nothing compared to the suffering of the Darfuri people,  
still this is a very profound spiritual question  
which all of us have to face.  
How are we to live in a world of suffering?  
How are we to respond to the cries of the world  
and not go mad with grief?

These days we have no shortage of information  
about what is happening in our world.  
Anyone who turns on the news or opens the newspaper  
is bombarded with stories of war and violence  
and suffering all over the world.  
When I go to Yahoo! to check my email,  
more news headlines pop up:

the fires in Australia,  
more people killed in Afghanistan,  
drug-related gun battles in Mexico—  
it never ends.

And it never will end in this life.  
No wonder if our compassion flags.  
No wonder if we long to tune it all out  
and retreat to a place of innocence  
where we didn't know these things about the world.

But knowledge, once gained, cannot be un-known.  
It can only be repressed,  
and that comes at a cost for everyone, ourselves included.  
We can ignore the world's problems, for a while,  
but they don't go away, not really,  
not even within our own selves.  
Even if life is going along just fine for us,  
maybe we will start to have bad dreams.  
Maybe we develop strange pains in our body,  
chronic pain that doesn't want to go away.  
Maybe we feel sad, or numb, or distant, cut off,  
less present, somehow, to our very lives.  
All these things can happen when we try to ignore what we know—  
that the world is full of suffering.  
It is full of beauty and love and delight, yes, that is true too,  
but it is also full of suffering...  
and when we try to block out our connection to the suffering  
we can lose our ability to connect to the beauty too.

But how can we live with the knowledge of all this suffering?  
How can we stay present to it and not drown in it?  
Let me tell you about someone who found his way to an answer.  
Some of you know the great Howard Thurman,  
an African-American Baptist minister.  
He was born in 1899 and raised by his grandmother,  
who had been a slave.

In 1935, he went to India as the leader of a delegation of black clergy meeting with Mohandas Gandhi.

Gandhi challenged him to use his Christian faith as the basis for nonviolent action against racism in the U.S.

Ten years later, Thurman went to San Francisco to help found the first racially integrated, multicultural church in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

A few years after that, he became a professor at Boston University, where he met a young graduate student named Martin Luther King. Thurman became one of King's most important mentors.

This was a man who knew a great deal about human suffering.

But he wasn't paralyzed by it;

he didn't retreat into despair or helplessness

or pretending things are different from what they are.

He found a way to act and become a great leader

by using the gifts he had been given.

Howard Thurman once said:

"Don't ask what the world needs.

Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.

Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

*Don't ask what the world needs.*

*Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.*

*Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*

Thurman's words as I experience them are incredibly liberating.

If you want to serve the world,

the very best way for you to do that

is to discover what makes *you* come alive,

to listen for what touches *you*,

and follow that.

Don't worry if it doesn't seem like the most important or urgent thing in the world.

If it really touches a place of truth and power inside you,

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard\\_thurman.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html).

that is enough.  
What you do will matter.

I'm not expecting every single one of us here today  
to commit to helping Darfur find peace.  
That's not why I'm preaching today,  
though if you do decide to do something,  
perhaps to recommit, that would be wonderful.  
I decided to preach today about Darfur  
not because I have all the answers—  
though I've learned a lot more about ways that we really can help—  
not because I think this is the only problem in the world  
which deserves our care—  
of course it is not.  
I'm not expecting every one of us will be moved by the same thing,

But I decided to preach about Darfur today  
partly because I know how much it does matter to some of us.  
I've been deeply inspired by the stories I've heard  
about what you personally are doing to help.  
And I'm here telling you about Darfur because *I* needed to.  
This is something that matters to me too.  
I don't want to use this pulpit  
to railroad you with my personal concerns,  
but I need to speak from my heart also.

So what I hope you will do today  
is look within and ask yourself, what am *I* called to do?  
What could I do to serve this world  
that would make me feel more alive?  
The world has so many challenges  
that it really is enough to just pay attention  
and act where you feel moved.  
Allow yourself to feel what calls you, what touches you,  
what tugs at your heart,  
even if it's not what you think it should be,

or what other people expect it to be.  
That's where your *life* is, that's where your energy and your power  
and your conviction lie,  
and the only wrong you can do is to ignore that call.

You know, I never used to like the unison reading we shared today.  
I used to hear those words,  
“No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.  
There's too much work to do,”  
and inside I would rebel.  
I'd think, *But I'm tired. I have too much to do already.*  
*I don't want to take on one more thing.*  
*That sitting-down part sounds good!*  
But I heard it with new ears this week.  
With Howard Thurman's words echoing in my thoughts—  
*Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it—*  
I heard a different meaning in Dorothy Day's idea.  
On one level I still think she is wrong.  
We all have a right to our feelings.  
If you feel hopeless, you feel it. It just *is*.

But she's right in another way.  
If you believe that what you do doesn't matter,  
*that* is simply not true.  
It is a false notion about reality and how the world actually works.  
All the hard things take time.  
All the hard things take the efforts of many, many people  
working together.  
Maybe you remember the story we told a few weeks ago  
about the drop in the bucket.  
Who's to say your drop isn't one of the very last ones needed,  
rather than the first?  
So don't lose hope, don't lose heart.  
Just choose *your* work, the work that sings to you and gives you joy,  
and trust that it will matter.  
Trust that it will bless the world.

### *3. What Can We Do to Help?*

If Darfur is your work, or a part of it—  
if you feel called to help but don't know what to do,  
don't be afraid.

There are so many groups that are working to help,  
and they would love to have your support.

Some of you will remember two years ago we collected money  
to benefit Solar Cookers International,  
which continues to supply solar cookers  
to one of the refugee camps in Chad  
so that women don't need to leave the camp  
to collect firewood for cooking.

This is just one example that shows us  
there are things we can do to help, there really are.

I personally connect very strongly with the work  
our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is doing in Darfur  
to protect women and children,  
who make up 80% of the people in the refugee camps.  
The UUSC tells the story of one of their consultants,  
who helps the women in the camps  
learn how to speak up and raise their concerns  
about the risks they are facing every day as women.  
This can be hard, because the camp leaders are all men,  
and even the peacekeeping troops who are there to protect them  
haven't been trained to think in terms of gender and women's needs.  
So this consultant was working with a group of Darfuri women,  
helping them tell their stories and say what *they* needed.  
At the end of the session, one Darfuri woman told her,  
“You are the first person to listen to us.”  
That work matters to me, and maybe it will to you too.

So, if you are moved and able, donate money. That helps a lot

when you are giving to groups like the UUSC  
who are doing good and important work,  
and again I thank you for your gifts this morning.

And don't forget the power of your witness.  
Talk to your family and your friends about what's happening.  
It's hard to start those conversations,  
but maybe you will educate someone.  
Maybe you'll be the one to help someone else get connected.  
Or write to your representatives.  
We hear this suggestion all the time,  
but that's because it *works*. It's effective.  
Let them know you care about Darfur and you're paying attention.  
This is a big problem and it's not going to be resolved overnight,  
but your witness matters.  
Your one letter might change nothing,  
but what if your one letter is one of a thousand?  
A hundred thousand? A million? People start to pay attention.  
Things start to change.  
Dorothy Day was right—we need to *lay one brick at a time,*  
*take one step at a time.*  
And Howard Thurman was right—  
*what the world needs is people who have come alive.*  
Wherever your passion for justice lies,  
whatever gifts you bring,  
let your Valentine's Day gift to the world be a gift of loving service.  
And may this gift return to you as life abundant.

May you be well.  
May the people of Darfur be well.  
May all the people in every land be well.  
May we be well.

So may it be.  
Amen.