

#WeDefy

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Introduction, by Lin Hinds

The family of British immigrants to which Martha Ingham Dickie was born worshipped at historic First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island. The Church's legacy included religious free-thinking, respect for diversity, and world service and these were the values that seeped into the soul of the young girl who attended services there. Martha's inclination toward service led her to seek a career in social work and she reveled in the diversity and the challenges it brought her, thinking, with her marriage in 1927 to Waitstill Hastings Sharp, that she had taken only temporary leave of the profession. Although it was a career to which she never returned, Martha used many of its skills in other spheres of activity, including her work s for the Unitarian Service Committee.

Her husband had fulfilled his family's expectations by graduating from Harvard Law School and during his third year of law school he came to know Dr. Eugene Shippen, minister of Second Church in Boston. He became part-time director of religious education at Second Church and, later, through the support of Dr. Shippen, National Director of Religious Education for the American Unitarian Association (AUA). Several years later, he was ordained a Unitarian minister and in 1933 took the pulpit of a small church in Meadville, Pennsylvania. His wife noted that his sermons brought together his interest in international affairs and Unitarian theology.

While in Meadville, Martha also worked with local internationalist and peace groups, the world situation having become an ever-increasing source of concern for her and for her husband. By the time of their next pastorate, in April 1936, at the Unitarian Church of Wellesley Hills, MA, Hitler had consolidated his control of Germany, was a few months away from securing the alliance with Mussolini in Italy, and Spain was on the threshold of civil war. With an eye on these and other world events, the Sharps started an International Relations Club. At the November 1938 meeting of the club, following the ceding of the Sudetenland to Hitler, the Sharps led a discussion on "The Rape of Czechoslovakia." They had no way of knowing that within three months they would be on their way to Czechoslovakia as emissaries of Unitarian intervention in the history of that country.

The call came from Rev. Everett Baker, who was then Vice President of the American Unitarian Association. He asked that Waitstill and Martha meet with him to talk. At that meeting he informed the Sharps that they had been chosen by the highest authorities in the church to undertake a unique relief mission in Czechoslovakia -- to sail for Europe and conduct the first intervention against evil undertaken by the AUA. Waitstill Sharp learned that he was the 18th choice and that others had turned down the invitation for three reasons: They didn't want to impair their professional advancement. They didn't want to break up their families. They thought war was definitely coming and they didn't want to be in danger.

The Sharps, motivated by their faith and their moral outrage, made the difficult decision to accept the charge. They left their two small children in the care of close friends in the congregation and on February 4, 1939, they set sail for Europe, arriving in Prague on February 23.

Part of their mission was to assist with refugee re-settlement projects, working with Czech government officials and other contact groups to process dossiers of people needing to escape. Shielded by Waitstill's cover as a visiting minister and because they had come to Czechoslovakia before the Nazi takeover on March 15, their exit visas allowed them to re-enter the country after taking short trips abroad so that between March 15 and early August, 1939, they made six separate trips to their various European contacts. Waitstill estimated that they had about 3,500 clients -- mostly journalists, writers and artists, other professional men and women, political leaders, and students -- many of whom were Jewish and, therefore, doubly in danger. The Sharps were unable to keep records so who those people were, what percentage of them actually escaped, and, beyond that, survive the war is unknown.

The other part of the Sharps' mission, refugee relief, was easier to document. For Unitaria, the Unitarian congregation in Prague, they bought supplies of food, medicine, and wool, which were secreted under the great heavy tiles of the church floor. They gave money to Unitaria to pay down the mortgage. They assisted the Salvation Army in its feeding program. Over a period of four months, they provided dinners and suppers for 350 German and Austrian refugees. Waitstill reported that by summer's end, 284 of them had escaped.

The care of children was a primary concern, especially to Martha. They gave money to children's homes and summer camps, to a refugee maternity pavilion sponsored by the Czech Red Cross, and to a children's relief project in Brno. Finally, there were grants for students who were planning to leave by way of a secret route through Poland and then to England.

The Unitarian mission did not escape Nazi suspicion. Their offices were rifled, the furniture tossed out into the street, and the operation closed down entirely in late July. The Sharps stayed on, gathering loose ends until August. Though leaving Czechoslovakia at different times, the couple left together for New York on August 30. Before the boat landed, Germany had invaded Poland, and World War II was underway.

That tragic event, coupled with the denomination's pride in the Sharps' work, led to the establishment of a Unitarian counterpart to the widely-respected American Friends Service Committee. Waitstill Sharp became part of a committee that worked toward the formation of the Unitarian Service Committee, established in May, 1940, as a standing committee of the AUA. Today, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a respected international agency funding grassroots development projects abroad and addressing social justice issues here in the United States.

In June, 1940, after being home for just a few short months, Martha and Waitstill accepted another commission thru the newly founded UUSC, although with reluctance at leaving their children for a second time. The plan was to establish a center from which Unitarian

representatives would provide relief to Czech refugees and act as liaison with their separated families in Rumania, Hungary, or wherever in still-free Europe they might be.

Martha and Waitstill reached Lisbon on June 20 with no particular instructions except a mandate to see what the new situation required and to do it as best they could. The couple then set up the first USC office in neutral Portugal. Throughout the war Lisbon remained a last hope for refugees trying to find passage to safer ports.

During these years, the Sharps and others staffed the USC's Lisbon office and, in collaboration with many other individuals and organizations, helped several thousand people escape. The Unitarians focused on political refugees—people who had spoken out against Nazism in Germany or fascism in Spain and whom other organizations were reluctant to help—as well as academics, scientists, and intellectuals.

Their continued work for the greater good took a toll on them personally. By early 1952, their marriage had failed. They both believed, into old age, that the separations endured in wartime service had damaged their marital bond beyond repair. Both of them later remarried. However, their shared legacy endures in their works and in the lives they saved.

Yad Vashem was established to perpetuate the memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. As Israel's official memorial, one of its principal duties is to convey the gratitude of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to non-Jews who risked their lives and mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values. They are known as the *Righteous Among the Nations*. Those recognized receive a medal, a certificate of honor, and their names are commemorated on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem. In light of the risks taken by the Sharps, Yad Vashem decided on September 9, 2005, to confer upon the late Waitstill and Martha Sharp the title of *Righteous Among the Nations*. They are only the second and third U.S. citizens named to an honor roll of more than 20,000 "righteous" gentiles. In recognition of their courageousness, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has also dedicated plaques in their memory.

By the very definition of hero, the Sharps both qualify. But at what cost do all of these accolades and honors come to them? The moral example of the Sharps is arguably much greater, and certainly more complex, than these few facts I have shared with you. When they made two lengthy trips to Europe to save the children of strangers, they left their own children with friends and parishioners. Decades later, their children, and even their grandchildren, are still working out the emotional consequences and thinking over the ethical questions created by the couple's wartime activity.

"The moral dilemma they pose for each of us is not just, 'Am I willing to risk my own skin to save someone else's life?' It is, 'Am I willing to impose risk and sacrifice on my children to save other people's lives?'" says their grandson, Artemis Joukowsky III.

The story of the Sharps' courage illuminates some of the dilemmas that perplex people who care about social justice. How many of us want to help but are afraid or don't know how?

Taking a courageous stand does not require sacrifices and heroics on the scale of the Sharps. “It is easy to feel small in comparison to Waitstill and Martha Sharp,” says the Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz, past president of the UUA. “Not every one of us can set out for war-torn Europe. But every one of us can [help] those who do.”

In sharing his grandparents’ experience, Artemis Joukowsky wanted their story to inspire others, not overwhelm them. “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.”

Partnering with Ken Burns, Artemis is now telling his grandparents’ story in the new documentary, *Defying the Nazis*. It is a way to pass along to us and future generations the question that Martha Sharp often asked him: What are you going to do that is important in your life?

After the war while having lunch in a Prague cafe, Waitstill was approached by a young Jewish woman to whom he had given ten thousand crowns for that journey. She had spent the war in the service of the British army as a cartographer, the only one of a family of 88 to survive. I can only imagine...

Meditation, by Cynthia Cotton

Once there was a place that was very bleak and dreary. All the colors there were only shades of gray and brown. Nothing grew there: no grass, no flowers, no trees. And this place was surrounded by walls and fences.

People lived in this place. Every day they were forced to work digging holes, and then shoveling the dirt they’d dug out, back into those same holes. This work made them feel tired and their bodies ached. And they felt hopeless, for their work never amounted to anything.

The food they ate was just a little bread and some broth. Their bellies were never full, and they were always hungry. Plus, they got sick a lot, for this food wasn’t nutritious enough to keep them healthy.

At night, they slept, if they slept, on hard wooden beds. They had no pillows or blankets, so they were cold and they shivered much of the night. When they did sleep, they had bad dreams, and when they woke up, they were just as tired as they’d been the night before.

One morning in this place, a girl went out. And suddenly, she saw something on the ground. Something special and precious. It was...a red raspberry!! Quickly, she picked it up and slipped it into her pocket. She kept it safe there all day, and that night, she found a leaf that had blown in from the outside. She put the leaf in her hand and placed the red raspberry on the leaf, and went to her friend, and presented it to her friend as a gift. And her friend received it.

This story is true. It took place in a Nazi slave labor camp during WWII. Gerta Weissman was a teenage girl when her friend Ilse gave her that special raspberry. Gerta Weissman survived the Holocaust to tell the story of how her dear friend gave away her only possession. Gerta is quoted as saying, "Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend."

I invite you now to think of a time when you received a special gift from someone. A gift from the heart. Like the gift of the raspberry in the story that, without a doubt, came directly from Ilse's heart.

Think about the special gift that you received..... Bring to mind the person who gave you that special gift..... Remember how you felt when you received the gift..... Can you still feel the love that came with the gift?

I'll bet Gerta Weissman can.

Reflection, by Rev. Jackie Clement

Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend. What an act of sacrifice. What an act of love. What are we prepared to sacrifice for love?

Several weeks ago I spoke about love and fear. I quoted several sources who said that when we do not act out of love we act out of fear. But love and fear are not opposites. Acting out of fear often looks like hatred, but love and hatred are not opposites either. To engage in actions of love or hatred or fear, requires some investment in the cause or the action or the outcome. The opposite of all of these is indifference, when we are completely disconnected. As writer, activist and Holocaust survivor Ellie Wiesel said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death."

Indifference to the plight of others is not only counter to love and beauty and faith, it is the death of the spirit. It's hard not to become numbed to all the suffering we hear day in and day out. When the alternative is to become overwhelmed with the sorrow of it all then numbness, dissociation, apathy, even indifference can seem like a refuge. But it is not. In the long run it is more damaging than hatred. When you engage hatred there is a chance of change. When you engage indifference there is only indifference.

And so, understanding this pull to retreat into our own spheres, we have to call ourselves out again in love. We have to have places like this that acknowledge how hard it is to stay engaged and allow us a time of respite, places that offer us sustenance for the work, inspiration to tackle the tough stuff and refuge when it is needed. It would be nice to take sanctuary, to stay in sanctuary, to set aside the cares of the world. That is absolutely available. Turn off the TV, close the twitter feed, delete your Facebook account. Live in contented, peaceful solitude. But until

everyone can take sanctuary, we can't afford to do so. To bring Ellie Wiesel's voice back into the conversation, he said this: "As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

I would add that the quality of our spirit, the quality of our soul, depends on the quality of the world we are willing to sacrifice for. The Sharps chose to make a huge sacrifice leaving their children, their comfortable life, in risking their lives that others might find a better life, might be allowed to live at all. We might not have the opportunity or the capacity to make as bold a contribution as Martha and Waitstill Sharp, but their contribution to the world did not begin in 1939 when they set foot on the RMS *Aquitania* bound for Czechoslovakia. Before that, they were churchgoers just like us. They preached and occupied pews and taught classes and gathered in group discussions just like us. They formed an international relations club and shined a light on what was happening in Czechoslovakia. They lobbied Washington to accept greater numbers of refugees fleeing the Nazis. Martha ran for political office, and though she lost she continued to work in political circles. The Sharps did not take sanctuary in a personal sphere of concern, but in a time when anti-Semitism and xenophobia were widespread in this country they engaged the barriers of fear and indifference.

We face a similar moral test today. Today's refugees do not come from Germany and France and Czechoslovakia. They come from Syria and Haiti, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq. The list goes on. There are now more refugees fleeing Myanmar than Syria. They need our voices to speak for them.

Here in the US, where black lives are systematically crushed, where hatred against Muslims is openly spoken, where Mexicans are called criminals and rapists by those who would be our leaders, where 1600 children die of abuse in one year and where LGBTQ people are targeted for violence, here our voices are needed, our acts of sacrifice are needed.

Waitstill Sharp's colleague James Luther Adams was another Unitarian who was active in defying the Nazis. He wrote decades later of the parallels between what he experienced in Germany in the 1930s and what he experienced in America in the 1960s.

Watching television images of dogs and fire hoses keeping African Americans down Adams reflected that just as liberal Germans had not escaped complicity in Nazism, he could not escape his complicity in racism. He wrote, "Yes, it was true, I could not deny complicity in the venerable tradition of maltreatment of the African American in the USA." "I became acutely aware of the necessity for *explicit* commitment, in contrast to a vague sort of liberalism opposed to prejudices and promoting openness of mind."

We have to take explicit action to avoid complicity. We have to sacrifice something of our own comfort and privilege. The price of not doing so is too steep. Rev. Clemens Taesler was the minister of the largest Unitarian church in Germany during Holocaust. He kept the church open throughout the war by not opposing the Nazis or their message of hatred. He argued that it was

necessary to protect his family and provide spiritual support to his congregation of 1500 during a terrible time. These are very good arguments. But following the war, Taesler wrote these words to James Luther Adams, “An immense guilt has come over our German nation.... Though we were forced here in Germany to live since the fall of 1938 more and more as in a prison, all of us became accessory to the crimes.”

The church in Prague, Unitaria, that Lin mentioned was founded and led by Norbert Capek. Capek was also the creator of the flower communion that we, and many Unitarian Universalist communities, celebrate each spring. Capek’s church was where the Sharps hid relief supplies and where he preached that “every person is an embodiment of God.” For acts of high treason against the Third Reich, Norbert Capek was put to death by the Nazis and his daughter sent to hard labor.

Two ministers, colleagues, in the same time and much the same context, making very different moral decisions, each with its own cost. I do not fault either of them their choice. Moral decisions are not always simple or clear. If there was fault in the liberal churches it was in maintaining a too naively optimistic view blind to the realities of the day. It was in not speaking out before Hitler had consolidated the power to keep them more and more in prison. The lesson for us is that when demagoguery rears its seemingly innocuous infant head we cannot ignore it and pretend it will go away, that it hasn’t got an *actual* chance to become president. We need to meet it full on when it starts. History has shown that to not do so can mean our lives and the lives of millions of others. It can cost us our souls. As John Fitzgerald Kennedy said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good [people] do nothing.” And so we are called. We are called to defy hatred and indifference.

Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend. What an act of sacrifice. What an act of love. What are you prepared to sacrifice for love?

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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