

An invitation to join us in celebrating **Dr. Lotta's 100th**



November 28, 2009 will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova.

Bouncing Back and Moving Forward: Embracing Resilience, Rights and Respect!

Presentation by Susan Walsh to the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, January 21, 2005

I am really delighted to be given the opportunity to be with the First Unitarian Congregation this morning to share some of my field experiences and to pass on the latest news about USC Canada's direction and challenges. But I am especially pleased to start 2005, our 60th Anniversary year, with the congregation whose volunteers helped to launch the Unitarian Service Committee – volunteers, our founder, Lotta Hitschmanova, called her « golden friends ». I recently saw a film for the second time that captured those early years. It was produced in the late 80s during my first years with USC Canada and was called the « Soldier of Peace ». Have any of you seen it? If you have, you'll remember the clips of Lotta's very passionate and moving pleas to Canadians to try to understand what it must be like to be hungry, day in, and day out, to be frightened, to feel abandoned. She would ask: "Do you realize that two-thirds of humankind goes to bed hungry every night?"

Lotta spoke from the heart and from a deep connection with vulnerable and marginalized people, drawing, of course, on her own experience in Czechoslovakia during the Second World War. She too had been thrust from, as she put it, a very sheltered life to a world where she was suddenly a refugee, knowing what it meant to be hungry and without friends, losing both her parents in a concentration camp. "It was dreadful, just dreadful", she said. "You had no more roots, no one to turn to".

Our television screens over the past three weeks have been filled with images of people with that same look of hunger, fear, loss and uncertainty about the future. How could they not despair? And that look of worry shifts into our eyes. We can't imagine what we would do. **So**, many of us have dug deep in our pockets to help out, responding with kindness and generosity, just as Lotta would have predicted. Lotta knew about our capacity for giving only too well. She said:

"So much money is available in this country, which good people would **love** to give if **only** they knew how much it was needed overseas."



For more information on Dr Lotta's 100th, please visit DrLotta.ca

705-56 Sparks Street, Ottawa, ON K1P 5B1, Tel 1-800-565-6872, www.usc-canada.org

Our media has thankfully brought that story into our living rooms and hearts, so we **do** understand the need.

But Lotta also understood something else about human beings that fueled her desire and determination to build a more just world. She would often say, “but you have to remember, it is not **all** black.” She understood the capacity of people to bounce back and move forward again in amazing ways... When she first went to Bangladesh in 1972, a year after the war, she found corpses rotting in the streets and children wandering looking vacant, lost and so terribly sad. She reported coming close to a breakdown. But she found the courage to keep looking – to see beyond that initial shock and horror. She found hope in the **will** of people to restore their country, villages and homes. Lotta had an enormous trust in the strength and determination of the human spirit and in, as she put it, “the incredible faculties that are in every human being that are just waiting to be awakened.” She was convinced that local people could and should take charge of their lives. She was especially careful to give in a way that allowed people their dignity. In her words,

“To receive things is not very easy, it can hurt and you want to do it in a very gentle way and understand. They have a lot of feeling and are proud people that through an accident of geography are in a poor country. It is not their doing.”

Outsiders, she insisted, should not overstay their welcome and she would proudly list countries that USC had withdrawn from when the great need had subsided and they were able to make it on their own.

Thankfully, the footage and reports from Asia today are beginning to capture that capacity to rebuild – that resilience – and noting the importance of long term support that offers development with dignity.

I think that that is why I am here with you today. I have enjoyed my two decades of work in international development enormously. But until I saw the Globe ad for a USC Executive Director the notion of actually running an NGO the size of USC hadn't really crossed my mind. When I finished my doctoral studies a year ago this past October, I was thinking more about trying the academic root. I love research and writing and teaching for that matter. But then I saw the ad in the Globe. And there seemed to be no turning back. First I thought, lets keep the option open by simply putting in an application. I felt hesitant about the responsibility that came with the territory. Then when I got an interview and began to think about the possibilities, I began to feel like I would be deeply disappointed if I didn't get the position. I was drawn back to USC because I liked its values, the values that drew Unitarians to Lotta's side 60 years ago and to our donor base today. I read the first Unitarian's list of principles and purposes on your web site yesterday. You speak of dignity, the inherent worth of every person, justice, equity, compassion, peace, liberty, respect, and community. These are the values that shaped the work of USC Canada. I hope that you know how important Unitarians have been to the development of USC Canada's social justice character. These are the values I want to champion as USC's fifth person at the helm.

The conceptual framework that I have proposed to help guide USC Canada's work stem from these values. The framework highlights three key concepts: RIGHTS, RESPECT and RESILIENCE. Attention to all three Rs, I would argue, is critical for the building of healthy and just community. I call these the Three Rs of Sustainable Livelihoods. The RIGHTS part of the work is fairly straightforward although hardly easy. People need and deserve citizenship rights, cultural rights, human rights and gender justice to enjoy fulfilling lives. By RESPECT I mean the need to establish and nurture relationships that acknowledge our diverse experiences and contributions as well as our common cause. .

Resilience captures humanity's capacity not just to bounce back from times of crisis, but also to draw on the creative energy and knowledge needed to move forward in hopeful ways. It's increasingly a leading concept in development circles, embraced by the United Nations in conferences like the Conference on the Human Environment that took place in Stockholm Sweden in June of 2002. Participants there proposed this definition about resilient systems: "Resilient systems persist, prosper, innovate, and give rise to the systems of the future."

USC Canada has decided to adopt **Resilience** as a leading concept because time and time again we witness this impressive human resolve to stare adversity down and create a better future. We see this determination and skill in people trying to rebuild shattered lives in the wake of complex human-made conflict, as Lotta witnessed in Bangladesh, or after horrific natural calamities like the Tsunami disaster. We also see incredible resilience among people who live on the margins year in, year out, with the odds of a secure and healthy livelihood seemingly stacked against them. They refuse to be defeated.

During my travels to Ethiopia and Bangladesh this past November, I had the privilege of spending some time with several incredibly resilient people, families and communities. I would like highlight my encounters with but three of these impressive actors: a farmer participant in USC Canada's Seeds of Survival program, Jemal from Wello, Ethiopia; a physically-challenged resident of a flood-prone settlement in Bangladesh, Amanullah. He was a participant in a program designed to support people with disabilities run by our partner, the Village Disabilities and Development Centre (VDDC); and Syeda, a young adolescent woman from a slum area that skirts Dhaka. Syeda was a member of USC Canada's ADP program, soon to be called LEAD: Lifeskills and Education for Adolescent Development. All three participants reminded me, without saying so, that in a world of bad news stories, there is tremendous possibility.

If our televisions and radios were the only sources of information about the world and experience of Ethiopians farmers, an overwhelming majority of Canadians could be forgiven for envisioning only barren, harsh landscapes populated with desperate, emaciated people. Chronic undernourishment, verging on famine, remains the experience of the residents of a few parts of the country due to a series of very complex political, cultural and ecological factors. But the Ethiopian I saw for the first time this November had a completely different face. In Wello province, a region where, during the 1984 famine, farmers were forced to eat their seeds, sorghum plants towered high above our heads. I have a wonderful picture of Jemal with his hand high in the air holding the top of a sorghum plant (posted on the bulletin board). Pulses and teff fields were also full and flourishing, ready to be gathered and winnowed. Favourable weather conditions helped create a decent harvest for 2004. But my conversation with Jemal suggested that there was more to the story than good rains and sufficient sunshine. The farmers in this province has participated in USC Canada's Seeds of Survival program when it was first launched as a response to the tragic loss of genetic diversity after the 1984 famine. They had learned to revalue the knowledge of their grandparents and expand the plant genetic diversity of their sorghum fields, planting varieties of indigenous landraces with the ability to survive rainfall shortages and less fertile soils. USC's SOS program brings farmers and scientists together in an effort to benefit from the best of both knowledge systems. The principle goal is to maintain and expand farmers' livelihood security through the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and ecologically sound agricultural practices.

Jemal was a farmer promoter, fully committed to sharing his knowledge and skills with other farm families of his home community. He proudly showed us samples of his 42 varieties of sorghum. His only disappointment was USC's premature departure from the region after two years of programming, an unfortunate request by a government that at the time had a preference for industrial agriculture and agro chemicals. "There was just so much more to do and so many more

farm families who could benefit”, he said. He was happy to learn that that the current government has welcomed USC’s return to Wello through a partnership with a new NGO called the Ethio-Organic Seeds Association, or EOSA. He requested our staff to keep working hard to raise the funds needed to facilitate this return. He also offered to continue to assist with the expansion of this important program, expressing particular enthusiasm for the development of a community seed bank. When times were tough, there would still be seeds for future harvests. Resilience for Jemal is about ensuring diversity and valuing knowledge systems that are in harmony with our often-brutal natural world. He struck me as a resilience expert with much to teach us about sustainability. Within USC Canada’s global Seeds of Survival program, now reaching 12 countries, there are now 5000 farm families **also** able to teach some important lessons about resilience and sustainability.

Media images of Bangladesh are likewise often negative. This imprint is perhaps understandable because major flooding is almost an annual occurrence, numbing our attention to the devastation. But here too there is another Bangladesh to discover. Just six months after some of the worst flooding in years, I found myself on a small boat ferrying me and about six other passengers to flood plains six hours north of Dhaka. I was there to learn about a program for disabled peoples that offered treatment services in six communities for children with severe cerebral palsy and other similar conditions. I was to discover a partnership and program that not only provided services like physiotherapy for young clients with chronic pain, but also included a comprehensive community-based program that considered disability to be part of our human diversity – not a curse, but a challenge. Local residents were recruited as volunteer workers in the tiny one-room physio clinic. A community committee to oversee and advocate in support of the program had been organized. Hearing-impaired children with new hearing aids were being integrated into the regular school system. Children with severe harelips and cleft pallets were accessing free restorative surgery, thanks to the lobbying efforts of our partner. An education program about first cousin and early marriage was also reducing the numbers of new babies with disabilities. This program was succeeding in a community that regularly dealt with flooding and the repeated need to start over. When I met Amanullah, it didn’t take me long to understand why.

Amanullah had only one strong leg to walk with. Yet, with the help of a long wooden pole, he navigated narrow paths ways, gullies and eroded hillsides with the ease of an Olympic athlete. He was a member of the Program Supervisory Committee, volunteered at the physio clinic and participated in the program’s small micro-enterprise fund to help the families of the disabled make ends meet. He accompanied our monitoring team throughout the entire visit, never once uttering a complaint. He proudly showed me his modest bamboo and mud home, its limited furniture and belongs neatly piled along the side of the wall. Manuela’s smile was infectious, refusing to let any observer feel sorry for him. He was courageous and resilient, with skills USC should be proud to support. He refused to be a victim, instead choosing the role of capable actor. Our partner’s recognition of his strength and that of others like him in the community appeared to be at the heart of the program’s success.

15-year-old Syeda, a member of USC’s Adolescent program with an outreach to 60,000 adolescents across Bangladesh thanks to some generous funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, has also been forced to stare adversity down too often during her young lifetime. During the flooding last Spring, her home, like that of all the neighborhood children, was completely inundated. ADP classes had to be postponed with several of the girls called in to volunteer their help with the packaging of candles, blankets and emergency food supplies. When I visited Syeda’s ADP classroom, there were watermarks as high as the windows. Fortunately, life has returned to normal and she now proudly attends classes that have not only helped her to learn functional literacy skills but also to understand her rights and responsibilities as a young woman in a world

that does always consider her point of view or safety. She has learned about the government's dowry prevention laws, reproductive health issues, the risks and dangers of early marriage, environmental conservation and the responsibilities of citizenship. When I was about to leave her classroom, she stood with her fellow classmates to sing "we shall overcome" in Bengali, a song that appears to have emerged as the anthem of the program. I was able to join them in English, connecting my world with theirs.

It is really not very hard to connect our two worlds, despite the miles that separate us, despite the wealth and power differences. Our recent experience with the Tsunami has certainly shown us that where there is a will, there is a way. Funds and resources have flowed to the area almost as fast as the dreaded tsunami waves. Unfortunately, reminders of our interdependency, connections and shared responsibilities as a human species seem only to come when the disaster is compressed into a dramatic few hours, days or weeks and most of the damage has already been done. Just imagine what a difference it would make if the disasters that are slow, painful and drawn out, like HIV/AIDS or the widespread erosion of biodiversity and sustainable food production systems garnered urgent and broad-based attention. So it is up to us, those of us working for long term change to issue those reminders, to shout as loudly as we can about the need to deepen Canadian attention not only to the symptoms of injustice, like poverty and malnutrition, but to the injustices themselves – huge disparities in a world of plenty. We need to continue to extend our helping hands to those who are chronically dealing with crisis, bouncing back and bouncing back, intervening before there is no energy left. The Winnipeg Free Press published a short response this week to a woman who was complaining about all the direct mail appeals she received. The writer, Lindor Reynolds, wondered what would happen if the appeals dried up; if there were not constant appeals for help. Would Canadians still give? She reminded readers about the couple of generations of us who would never forget the voice of Lotta Hitchmanova. "Her television ads with exhortations to send donations to 56 Sparks Street, Ottawa", Reynolds wrote, "were a constant reminder of need and responsibility. They were also so omnipresent they became part of our cultural fabric." We need those constant reminders, not just in our mailboxes but also in our media, universities, churches, schools and community gatherings. I look forward to being part of a team that will help to issue those reminders and tell those stories. I hope that you will join me in this campaign and to evoke Dr. Lotta just one last time, "please *give* to the Unitarian Services Committee, 56 Sparks Street, Ottawa 4."