



Chain of humanity for dignity, equality and life without discrimination

By Shula Koenig, People's Movement for Human Rights Learning

In our fast moving tumultuous lives there are moments of unexpected transcendence that liberate us and give us real, meaningful hope. Recognizing and capturing these magical moments move us to reinvent our lives as one vibrant link in the chain of humanity's expectations for dignity, equality and life without discrimination. As we gain this insight we spontaneously acknowledge social responsibility -- changing the world with passion and commitment to rid it of poverty, to liberate it from violence, to create a new political culture based on human rights.

Such an extraordinary time took place 60 years ago, when Eleanor Roosevelt joined by men and women from more than eighty countries, gave the world the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- a "gift" that meant to remove the chains of colonialism, and to never again have humanity experience genocide. The Declaration delivered a holistic vision and practical mission, a space to belong, in dignity, in community with others -- as of FDR: free from fear and free from want.

The UDHR was signed and presented to the world by the United Nations on 10 December 1948 -- since then the 10th of December has become a day of celebration and contemplation, a time we must ask: what is the meaning of human rights to our daily lives? Can human rights become the guiding light for crafting a better world by all for all? And if so why so few of us know the meaning of human rights as a way of life?

Transcendence did not end with the event of the Declaration. It gave the United Nations its overarching purpose and radiated forcefully the vision for economic and social justice. It was translated by Member States into human rights norms and standards relevant to the lives of all women and men, youth and children in all places of all cultures and religions. These were formed as Covenants on Political, Civil, Economic, and Social and Cultural human rights and Conventions on: the elimination of racism; on the human rights of women and of children and recently of indigenous people, the disabled, and soon of migrants and more to come.

These carefully developed human rights instruments attempt to move humanity from the oppression of vertical and hierarchical institutions to newly constructed horizontal spaces, where all people can move freely and make choices for their lives, guided by the human rights framework.

It is a painful wonder to me why many working to change the world do not use this powerful tool for action --is it because many international human rights organisations focus mostly on violation and do not bring a comprehensive message to all of us who yearn to realise our hopes and expectations imbedded in the rich and powerful human rights agenda? (Indeed economic colonialism is alive and thriving, genocide did not vanish. There is much to be cynical about. This fortunately does not prevent me from being a fanatic about human rights.

I find it so gratifying and amazing how people develop systemic analysis when introduced to human rights as a way of life -- how they spontaneously decipher between symptoms and causes -- how honest discussions between women and men about patriarchy and the causes of human rights violation thereof have critical thinking flourish which sets the way for sustained realization of human rights.

Allow me to note: Stalin successfully killed Socialism. Global Capitalism eroded Democracy. HR has taken the best of Socialism and Democracy giving us a vibrant political and moral way to conduct our lives with the protection of HR law. It makes so much sense.

If one person was missing from the world the absolute truth would be different, said the French philosopher Levinas. Allow me to hang my words on tall trees and say: If one person was missing from the world human rights would be different. Human Rights are the living TRUTH. We each bring with us the moment of transcendence and uniqueness-of-being for which human rights was created. We must learn to act with Human Rights as a living organism, indivisible, interconnected and interrelated.

There is no other option!

Human Rights are the banks of the river where life can flow freely -- and when the floods threaten us people who know human rights strengthen the banks, avoiding the floods. A grassroots movement sharing the knowledge of human rights will strengthen the banks of the river.

The discovery of human rights as a way of life through learning and dialogue at the community level can be a moment of transcendence, a moment of trust, respect and acceptance of others as full human beings.