

Worth and Dignity of Labor

UU Union Service – March 26, 2006 – UUSC Justice Sunday

First Parish in Cohasset

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Shantaram is a semi-autobiographical novel situated mostly in Bombay, India, about twenty years ago. It was written by Australian writer Gregory David Roberts. It is 933 pages long. I will not give you a plot summary.

But early in the book, the narrator, an Australian by the name of Lin, recently arrived in Bombay, is standing outside his little hotel. He is transfixed by a line of Indian men fetching water from a kind of water wagon on the street and then carrying huge pots of water up the stairs, down again with empty buckets, up again with buckets filled.

Well, after awhile Lin's tour guide arrives and Lin asks him what these men are doing. His guide said that they're hauling the water for Lin's and the other guests' showers, because the shower comes from a tank up on the roof. These guys were filling the tanks.

Well, Lin right away feels guilty about the three showers a day he had been taking in the oppressive heat, and these fellows climbing six flights of stairs so that he could have his showers. "I'll never take another shower in that hotel again!" he says.

No, no, no! his guide responds. Keep taking your showers. It's only because of tourists like you that these men even have jobs, instead of begging on the street or stealing for bread. And look at them, the guide went on. They're "strong and proud and healthy." Keep taking your showers!

Of course, *of course*, we don't want to be responsible for the exploitation of other human beings through labor poorly paid or done under unsafe or unsanitary conditions. But in a complex world we can't always know what *is* exploitation and what *isn't* – and sometimes we simply *won't* know enough to be able to make fully informed, intelligent decisions as consumers.

But sometimes we *can* know enough!

Coffee, for instance. Maybe you've learned that most coffee workers are exploited, poorly paid, exposed to pesticides. Maybe you know that a \$3.00 latte delivers about 2 cents back to the farmers who picked the beans, hardly enough to support a family.

So, maybe you could stop drinking coffee!

Or you could drink different coffee. As I hope you know, many of our congregations serve Equal Exchange Fair Trade coffee, part of the Coffee Project sponsored by our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the Equal Exchange company. When we drink Equal Exchange we can know that we are supporting fair wages and environmentally sustainable growing practices. Simple as that. And pretty darn good.

So, just as the narrator in *Shantaram* would have been doing those workers *no favor* by taking no more showers, so would we be doing workers *no favor* by *not* buying coffee. There might be other reasons to cut back on an out of control coffee habit! But in moderation (and maybe under a doctor's supervision...!) keep drinking that java – just make it Fair Trade.

There *are* so many ways in which we just can't know which decisions we make as consumers are most supportive of those who make or grow or serve. But sometimes we *can* know. And when we *do* know (and coffee is of course not the only example), there's no longer an excuse. And one decision can lead to another and another, as we bring our daily actions into

harmony with our deepest values: such as the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including the women and men who grow our coffee.

Is this kind of individual action enough? No. There is much to do in the larger shared work of bringing more peace and justice to the world. But are our individual daily actions as consumers and citizens essential? Yes.

So buy Fair Trade coffee. *And* join the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (another very good way to use your money), which partners with organizations around the world on behalf of justice and equity and the inherent worth and dignity of children, women, and men everywhere – from sanitation workers in New York to coffee farmers in Guatemala to water carriers in India. Everyone. Everywhere.