

A Just Cup

That Spiritual Bean

Chaplain Robert Keim
14 May 2017

It is late August, 1991.

My wife Irene, her mother Catherine and I are enjoying a few days at a bed and breakfast in Seattle's University District. A grandly restored 1870's home, this place is extraordinary both indoors and around the grounds.

It is the first of three mornings we will spend in the inn. And let me say before I go too far that I loved and admired Irene's mother. She was good to her children, kind to animals, and caring and respectful with extended family members. And she was, now and then, surprising and whimsical.

At defining moments of life, she had lived through both the onset of the Depression and World War II. She experienced the rapid evaporation of her father's business in Pittsburgh as the Stock Market collapsed in 1929. As his fortunes crumbled, she, three siblings, and her mother found themselves living first in a truck, next a tent, and then a barn they shared with a cow in Belle Glade, on the southeast shore of Lake Okeechobee. They had come down that way because folk wisdom said you could always find fish and fresh vegetables to eat in that part of the world.

She had a brother and brother-in-law go to war in Europe, survived more than one hurricane, lived a life of conservative Catholicism fractured by divorce, and finally came to find herself at times bewildered (or, bemused) by the rapidly changing world we take for granted.

But more important for this story, she was not a morning person – at least not until after her third cup of coffee. She could actually shower, dress, do her hair and emerge into a public setting not yet truly awake.

On this particular morning, Catherine made her way downstairs to begin the day. Her mind was set on one thing – their Seattle's Best coffee. Irene was still upstairs, but I had already come down and, not being a coffee person at the time, made myself a cup of hot tea. I knew better than to trouble Catherine with morning chatter. She would let me know when she was ready to be sociable.

She'd just sat down with that first cup when the swinging doors leading from the kitchen opened and two innkeepers bustled into the room. One had a large bowl of muffins, the other a colorful vase filled with sunflowers. With lively chatter they moved about the room, making sure everything was just right.

Off they went back to the kitchen for more breakfast items and Catherine stared at the doors, not quite knowing what to think. And then, just as she once more started that first sip, the doors again swung open and this time they brought spreads for the muffins and an exquisite bowl of fruit. Still chatting animatedly, they went back to the kitchen.

She stared at those doors and finally noticed my presence – and I could hear her unspoken word in my head.

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“Gracious!”

Slowly, she began that first sip.

Remember my reference to Seattle’s Best? Two years before this particular trip, we’d been in the Pacific Northwest, and the place we stayed then introduced Catherine to coffee sold under that label – which at the time was unavailable in this part of the world. And after a lifetime of Maxwell House, home would never taste the same again.

Never, that is until Irene, quietly paying attention to her mother, took me with her on a quest.

We went to a local roaster in the Tampa area. We talked about the experiences out west, strength of roast, varieties of coffees, and her mother’s desires. After some conversation, he recommended a Sumatran blend – a medium roast he could produce at a reasonable price.

Catherine loved it, and drank it every day the rest of her life. As someone who lived by the words of an unknown sage: ***“And on the eighth day God created coffee, that we might be awake and enjoy the world,”*** she had found heaven.

One of the unforeseen outcomes of Irene’s quest, however, was our introduction to the world of the *“spiritual bean.”* We now know more about coffee than we ever imagined – maybe more than we ever wanted to know. And most of what we’ve discovered is either somewhat challenging or speaks directly to and about values we affirm to be grounding Unitarian Universalist principles.

Let me begin this journey, then, with two very important facts. *First*, according to United Nations Commodity Trading statistics for 2016, coffee is **the second most valuable commodity**, truly outdone consistently over the last twenty years only by oil. *Second*, despite a long history travelling from Ethiopia through Egypt and Turkey to England and Europe before coming to the New World, **the United States is an economic giant in the coffee world**. According to the World Trade Organization, in 2014, less than 15% of the world’s population drank 74% of the world’s coffee, and the United States was far and away the largest single consumer nation.

Now, historically, coffee producing nations of the world operated as a cartel of sorts known as ICA – the International Commodity Agreement – whose marketing treaty the United States had traditionally signed onto. Not quite another OPEC, it helped keep coffee prices at “sustainable levels.” The 1988 standard purchasing price for coffee futures was \$2.40 per pound, and that year, ICA’s foundational agreement was up for renewal.

But then President Ronald Reagan refused to sign. An apostle of Milton Friedman’s “free trade absolutism,” lobbied hard by America’s primary coffee producing companies, Reagan packed America’s delegation with adamant negotiators, then ordered them home without signing. Without our political influence and no other organized support at the time, the ICA collapsed.

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At first, this effected farmers little. Prices fluctuated more than before yet stayed reasonably close to what they had been. But moves behind the scene would change the situation forever.

In 1989, coffee was already grown in Vietnam – about 70,000 tons a year. This sounds substantial, but compare it to Ecuador’s 1.14 million tons the same year. As *Forbes Magazine* put it, **“In the late ‘80s, the ‘Big Four’ (at the time Folgers, Maxwell House, Mr. Coffee and Nescafe), seeking beans at the lowest price, pressured the World Bank to finance Vietnam’s coffee culture. Quality of product was never a concern, maximum profits were.”** By 2000, Vietnam would produce over a million tons of coffee beans – for which the “Big Four” were the primary market. Today, they are the #2 coffee-growing nation in the world, surpassed only by Brazil.

In this story there are three key issues.

- First, there are two kinds of coffee beans, arabica and robusta (of which arabica are for true coffee addicts, the beans of choice); the problem is that arabica beans do not grow in Vietnam.
- Second, flooding the market with inferior robusta beans while maximizing their profit margins, the “Big Four” lowered the price of coffee paid to growers from \$2.40/pound to \$0.60/pound.
- Third, a new level of involvement was introduced to the farmer-to-market process. Known in South America as the *coyote*, or advance buyer, a “back market” lender financed with “Big Four” complicity, in exchange for an up-front loan, would buy a farmer’s crop at a bargain price w/a high interest rate. The international relief organization Oxfam has stated that *coyote* loans drove the farmers’ actual returns down to \$0.19 to \$0.25 per pound.

The results? Well, first, because robusta beans grown in Vietnam are the cheapest variety, average Americans are being offered – at artificially subsidized low prices – a poorer quality product containing unknown (or, as Folgers calls them, “private”) artificial components while company spokesmen tout that they are “passing along substantial savings.”

More importantly, given the shift in buying practices, there have been five serious effects on global coffee growing practices:

- 1 Ongoing depression of small-scale growers’ markets.
- 2 Accelerating loss of tropical rainforest, as large tracts are clear-cut to become plantations, with poor quality beans on short-lived plants.
- 3 Varieties of coffee grown worldwide are shrinking, reducing the diversity of possibilities and increasing the susceptibility of crops to unforeseen adverse effects.
- 4 In Central America, coffee farms are disappearing, with farmers moving to cities – many dreaming of coming to America.
- 5 And, in South America, small growers are turning to cocaine and opium production at an alarming rate, because these are far more profitable cash crops.

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Given all these, what can we do?

Well, we begin by going home to our Unitarian Universalist values.

It is time we take personal action, time we commit ourselves to become **“Just”** consumers, and that we do so as both individuals and congregations. I challenge each of us to look beyond our wallets and participate in the organic, shade grown and Alternative Trade coffee markets.

Why these three varieties? Well, organic is self-explanatory, but there’s more to the issue. First, shade grown because (a) it is the natural habitat for coffee, and growing in the sun shortens the life of the tree by several years, and (b) it is far more environmentally sensitive, there being a direct correlation between this process and the higher number of animal species that share such a farm - birds, reptiles, butterflies and other organisms. And as for Alternative Trade – well, in the words of coffee scientist Rob Everts: *“The Fair Trade idea may have won success in the last 10 years; but that success has been tarnished. Control has been wrested from small farmers and turned into a marketing attribute at the service of large northern companies, stripping it of all real meaning.*

For these reasons, there is a powerful step in building a democratic brand that connects small farmers in the South to citizen-consumers in the North. In order to be successful in realizing the original Fair Trade vision, we need to deepen involvement and participation in our model. In doing this, we move to the Alternative Trade model, which is Fair Trade at the core, extended with the commitment to ‘contribute to the alleviation of poverty by establishing a system of trade that provides marginalized producers in developing regions access to developed markets. This takes us back to the best that Fair Trade was always about – innovation, global solidarity, social imagining and learning, and economic justice.”

Organic and shade grown varieties within the Alternative Trade model reflects our Principles, bonding us in relationship with the communities that grow a bean we love and cannot ourselves produce. Recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of everyone, enhancing justice in market strategies, and widening our notion of community, the Alternative Trade ethic offers a viable response to our situation, assuring consumers the coffee they drink is both the “good stuff” and was purchased under agreements far more equitable than market commons.

You see, to be Alternative Trade certified, a grower or community meets stringent international criteria. In return, they are guaranteed a minimum price per pound (which rises as the market rises), extended much needed and “fairly financed” credit to farmers, and provided technical assistance such as help transitioning to organic farming. When we become engaged and committed Alternative Trade partners with our growers at an eye-to-eye level, doors of community development, health, education, and land stewardship open – ecological justice in every cup.

Indeed, our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee supports just such a **“Coffee Project,”** partnering with the **first and major** Alternative Trade coffee vendor in the United States, **Equal Exchange**. An

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inter-community Project, UUSC's goal is to help achieve the objectives of Alternative Trade by increasing knowledge in both Unitarian Universalist congregations and other parts of our world. Joining this project, we participate in the journey of the spiritual bean.

The more we as a congregation and as individuals support this journey, the stronger its energy and commitment; the more growers have a chance to lift themselves out of poverty while working in fundamental keeping with our Seven Principles. With our cups, as well as our words, we set a model for how the world might work.

The future is ours. We *can* change the world, one cup at a time. As I heard one day on the Sundance Channel, ***"If you think that your idea is too small, imagine that you are trying to sleep in a very small, enclosed bedroom – with one mosquito somewhere in the dark."***

Years ago, a sage of Florida's Big Bend country wrote on one of the walls of Posey's Oysterhouse in St. Marks, Florida, ***"All I need to know about life I learned while drinking coffee."***

Well said. Here's to that bit of wisdom, to the spiritual bean, and to a Just Cup. May it be so.

Amen and blessed be.

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It should be noted that while we were the first religious organization to engage in this two-way work and despite our relatively small number, remain the largest single buyer of Equal Exchange products, we have been joined by 11 of our spiritual colleagues:

- American Friends Service Committee Coffee Project
- Catholic Relief Services Ethical Trade
- United Methodist Committee on Relief
- Presbyterian Coffee Project
- United Church of Christ Fair Trade Project
- Jewish Fair Trade Project
- Lutheran World Relief
- Church of the Brethren Coffee Project
- Christian Church Disciples of Christ Coffee Project
- Episcopal Relief and Development Fair Trade Project
- Baptist Fair Trade Project