

## **CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY: YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

By Kathryn Ellis

Our altar cloth this morning and my shawl are beautiful, soft, and finely woven Indian silk. As a weaver, I know that it takes skill to weave such beautiful fabric. And it is highly likely that this beautifully crafted cloth was made with bonded child labor – slave labor.

Young, small children working in deplorable conditions take raw material from silkworm cocoons, help to make the thread and assist at the looms. Some children in the silk industry work seven days a week for ten to twelve hours a day.

I was shocked when I learned that it is quite likely that there are slave made products in all of our homes. I was shocked when I realized that I benefited from slavery. The facts about contemporary forms of slavery are shocking to many Americans; it has been and is invisible to us.

Many people believe that slavery is in the past. Slavery has been outlawed throughout the world and is illegal in almost every country. Nevertheless, slavery has been a rapidly growing phenomenon since 1945 (Bales, 2001). The commonly accepted figure is that there are 27 million slaves today. There are slaves in almost every country including the United States.. Forced laborers have been found in 90 of our cities, including two Pennsylvania cities. At any given time there may be 10,000 people working as forced laborers in the U.S. ([www.freetheslaves.net](http://www.freetheslaves.net)).

What do we do with this knowledge? How do we deal with our own unknowing complicity in this hidden, violent practice? Slavery mocks our Unitarian Universalist principles. How do we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations in the face of contemporary slavery?

Some suggest that using the word “slavery” is an exaggeration or that it should be thought of as a metaphor. Some use the word “slavery-like.” Yet, slavery is not a metaphor for far too many human beings. Slavery has several key defining characteristics:

1. It is an economic and social relationship between two (or more) people. One is forced to work by the other for no pay or a token pittance.
2. Violence and threats of violence control the laborers.

3. There are no choices for the slave who lives in constant fear of violence and is often physically restrained. The laborer has no control, no free will. They are not free to leave.
4. The slave is exploited, dehumanized, and treated as a commodity. Slavery is about profit. The buyers and sellers use these people so that they may make more money.

Three things have led to the growth of modern slavery and to its changed character. The world's population has tripled since 1945 especially in the developing world. Globalization has led to rapid economic and social change. Changed economies have led many poor rural people into debt and into the cities seeking work. They are vulnerable to being tricked and enslaved.

Contemporary forms of slavery are different than historical forms. In the antebellum United States, the investment in a slave cost the equivalent of about \$50,000; now a slave can be obtained for \$100.00 or less.

At today's costs, the slave is a cheap and disposable tool. There is no need to assert legal ownership, and there is no need to protect the investment through medical care or nourishing food. If the laborers can no longer do the work, they can be thrown away. These relationships are much more likely to be short term. There is no need to spend money if a worker is missing; that person can easily be replaced.

Historically, large initial investments and high maintenance costs contributed to keeping profits low. With contemporary low investments, high profits can be made. A slave can be worked to illness, disability or death, and the slave may be abandoned when there is no more work.

The psychology of contemporary slavery is an important aspect. For families in hereditary debt bondage, the perception has been that this is simply the way life is. Many have not learned psychological and life skills for independent adult life. They may have been sold into a country where they do not know the language or the culture. All are psychologically and emotionally battered.

American activist and Director of Free the Slaves, Kevin Bales stated that slaves often know that they are illegally enslaved. What they do not know is that they can be free and survive. Freeing the mind and spirit is not an easy task.

India, where this beautiful fabric came from, is "home to more slaves than all other countries of the world combined" (Mehta, p.1). "India has the largest number of child workers in the world. . . . A significant percentage of these 44 million children are bonded laborers"(USAID India). Debt bondage is the most frequent form of slavery in India as it is in the world today (Godrej, p. 5).

A person becomes a bonded laborer to repay a loan. The loans are incredibly small by our standards; a child became a bonded laborer because the landlord had given the child's father a blanket. This child laborer was Keshav Nankar who is now an effective adult anti-slavery activist (Godrej, p. 5).

Once the loan is made, the laborers are then tricked into perpetual slavery. They are paid a pittance (perhaps 17 cents a day), charged excessive interest, perhaps given additional "loans" for emergencies, and told that the debt is never paid off.

Slavery thrives in India because the government can be weak, and legislation is often not enforced. In some cases, local police and low-level government officials may be involved in trafficking, slave holding or enforcing debt bondage. They have returned child bonded laborers to the silk workshops. Sometimes when the spotlight is shone on child bonded labor, the factories and workshops are closed but the bonded labor continues. It is moved into more hidden place.

Intimidation and physical violence, including sexual assaults, are used. The workers are sometimes chained or tied up. When asked why he did not run away, Keshav Nankar:

gives me an indulgent smile before replying that with no money, no education and no experience of life beyond his village this wasn't a possibility. And, he adds, all the landlords of the surrounding villages were related to each other, so it would have been impossible to stay undercover. (Godrej, p. 5)

Keshav Nankar was the child who was enslaved for a blanket. He was freed by Vivek and Vidyullata Pandit, a husband and wife team of New Abolitionists. For more than twenty years, they have worked to free more than 1500 bonded laborers in 450 villages.

Vivek Pandit "is adamant that real liberation takes place in the mind, that physical freedom isn't enough" (Bales, 2002, p. 4). The bonded laborer "must be made to believe that it is possible to stand up to their former landlords and to adjust to a life of freedom" (Bales, 2000, p.62).

The Pandits have a program of education designed to teach self-worth, curiosity, thinking and problem-solving. They teach that power must be taken and teach the skills to face conflict (Godrej, p. 6). Unitarian Universalists have partnered with the Pandits through the Holdeen India program.

I focused on India because this is where our altar cloth came from, but slavery thrives in the United States, too. The 2004 report *Hidden Slaves: Forced Labor in the United States* documented that conditions are not much different for forced laborers here.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to act in the world. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings. We are called to bring justice, equity, and compassion to the world. We are called to do what we can to repair and transform the world.

But defining right action can be hard in the real world. How does one help another out of a condition that that person sees as deserved? Are we being cultural imperialists? How do we face the ethical situation that we have a beautiful altar cloth probably made by child slave labor? That we have slave made products in our homes? How do we confront the fact that we benefit from slave labor whether or not we wish to do so? What power do we have to create change? “If responsibility for slaveholding is extended to those who profit from it, we have to confront a shocking ethical problem. Those who profit from slavery might include you or me or anyone. . . . How much is the average person willing to pay to end slavery?”(Bales, 2000, pp.20-21)

We come from a prophetic tradition. UUs have an abolitionist history, but some historical Unitarians profited from slavery and opposed abolition. Where we will stand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And **how** do we stand for abolition?

Contemporary Unitarian Universalism can again become abolitionist. Education is the key. We need **to know** in order to act. Problems of this size can easily feel overwhelming to an individual or to a congregation. We can be tempted to return to denial and ignorance. We are called to address denial and ignorance. Get the facts. We can organize to educate ourselves and to educate our communities.

Kevin Bales stated that most people assume that the problem of slavery ought to be addressed by governments and the United Nations but that consumers actually have more power (Bales, 2001, p.21).

Investigate your retirement and investment funds. Communicate with corporate boards. Spending with consciousness makes a difference. Buying and selling SERRV International products helps the abolition process. Ten Thousand Villages and SERV V are both members of the International Federation for Alternative Trade. These organizations are NGOs whose purpose is to assist artisans rather than to maximize profits. They promote fair trade, justice in international trade, sustainable development, and independence for the workers. They support decent working conditions, gender equity, and respect for the environment ([www.ifat.org](http://www.ifat.org)).

We can buy carpets (Rugmark), chocolate (Divine Chocolate) and coffee (Equal Exchange) that are guaranteed not to have been produced with slave labor. These products do usually cost us more because the producers are paid more fairly. On the web, one can buy food, clothing, gifts, and interior design items from retailers who are members of the fair trade association.

Congregations can organize fund raising drives to support abolitionist organizations. Individuals and congregations can write to companies and ask them to be accountable. We are close to the headquarters for Hershey Foods. We could ask them what they are doing about the problem of slave labor in cocoa production. We can lobby, write letters and sign petitions.

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We can encourage and support training for U.S. law enforcement officers, health care and social service providers to recognize forced labor. We can be educated about how to help survivors.

While globalization plays a part in the increasing of human slavery, it also creates opportunities and tools for opposing slavery. Much of what I have read, I gathered from the internet. Opportunities to financially support anti-slavery activists are just a few clicks away.

May we be inspired by the courage of those who give so much to bring freedom and dignity to those who have been denied human rights. Let us work together for the day when slavery is truly abolished.

## Resources

Anti-Slavery International. [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)

Anti-Slavery International. "Vivek and Vidyullata Pandit Biographies." At [www.uua.org/international/holdeen/panditbio.html](http://www.uua.org/international/holdeen/panditbio.html).

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USAID India. "Combating Child Labor in India." At [www.usaid.gov/in/aboutusaid/projects/childlabor.htm](http://www.usaid.gov/in/aboutusaid/projects/childlabor.htm).

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