

From the Heart WUU March 30, 2008 Mike Dann

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., said:

“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”
2. That’s okay for the likes of Jesus, Ghandi, Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther king, Jr himself. I didn’t even dare try it until the past couple of years and well down the road on my spiritual journey.
3. For much of my adult life, I often felt that the world, including me, were in a swamp, up to our belt buckle in alligators. Dysfunctional national political and global tragedies—both natural and man-made-- used to stick to me like insects on old-fashioned fly paper. They accumulated until I felt weighted down, fearful, overwhelmed and depressed—a kind of paralysis that reduced joy and the ability to live fully.
4. Oh, there were *some* early *aberrational* joinings in causes; the college chapter of Fair Play for Cuba Committee in 1960; marching in front of a federal building in 1970 to protest the war on Viet Nam. But, acting out gave way to law school and law practice. You’ve heard about law school?—It sharpens the mind by narrowing it! I remained relatively closed spiritually and disengaged until age 40, when my spiritual journey and growth began
5. During my almost 30-year on-again, off-again spiritual journey I kept coming back to the Unitarian Church, where I always felt most at home spiritually—satisfying to both the head and the heart. I also liked the idea that Unitarians didn’t come to services for show. UUs dressed more casually and comfortably than others—just look around at all the comfortable, if not funky, shoes being worn today!!
6. It was a good while before I concluded that there was probably no *final* spiritual destination, that *no one* had a monopoly on the “truth” I was seeking. Then, a little voice spoke to me—“It’s about the journey stupid! It’s about the direction you’re taking, it’s about being open to

the possibility of unlimited change and growth—after all, and who but your cardiologist will be concerned that your heart is getting too big! You see, Mike, the journey *is* the destination.”

7. I began to lead with the heart and not just the head and to explore some brain-heart connections. I began making conscious choices to respond out of love and compassion through words and, more importantly, through actions. Love, compassion and resulting joy began to replace fear and depression. Paralysis was replaced by action—learning more about others’ problems and needs, speaking out, raising cane, joining with others. Hope began to dawn.
8. I changed legal careers—from private practice to public service, becoming a trial judge (I viewed it as a helping profession), where I remained for 20 years doing my best to dispense “justice” as I knew it from training—a kind of procedural justice if you will. You know, “We’ll give you a fair trial before we put society’s screws to you.” As my spiritual life matured, I became more interested in a different kind of justice—what I call substantive justice—that addresses quality of life questions—providing opportunities for all to live to their fullest potential—which includes freedom from oppression, hunger, poverty, ignorance and hopelessness.
9. That explains my current strong interest and involvement in the ongoing genocide in Darfur. Although I may never know them, tragic figures on the other side of the world. I decided to try the same formula—by learning more about their situation and needs and by taking personal ownership of them. Then, by acting—alone if necessary—but preferably with other like-minded folks—to help in some small way.
10. This Don Quixote-like approach may or may not make a difference in the level of violence or how much longer the genocide lasts. But the effects on me are positive and, I hope, lasting. The positive ways I feel about myself when I am involved, the notion that the human condition would improve measurably if everyone acted similarly in response to the crisis, the possibility that the innocent people in Darfur and in the refugee camps know or might learn that many individuals in Virginia care about them and their children.

11. Hope alone, prayer alone--won't get it done. But a hopeful attitude combined with loving, compassionate action, if practiced more widely by me and others can only help. What else do we have control over?

12. There is much to be said about the right kind of hope. I am reminded of the words of , Václav Havel , a famous writer-philosopher, and the first elected president of the Czech Republic following the collapse of the Soviet Union:

“Either we have hope within us or we don't; it's a dimension of the soul....Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and it is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

“Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well....but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

13. Concluding, for my part, there is a lot of payoff for me. I feel better aligned spiritually, with my conscience, and with my heart. Sometimes, I even think the world is too. I am hopeful about Darfur.

14. I haven't owned or used fly paper for years.