

An invitation to join us in celebrating
Dr. Lotta's 100th



November 28, 2009 will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova.

USC Canada: still planting the seeds that Lotta first sowed

Presentation by David Rain to the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, April 19, 2009

Introduction

Good morning everyone, and what a pleasure it is for me to be with you today, here in St Catharines, in such close proximity to one of the Earth's great natural wonders.

Before beginning my presentation, I'd like to express my sincere thanks to the members of your Congregation for inviting me to speak to you today. I'd also like to thank in particular those who have helped organize today's service and lunch – Pamela Wilson, Hilde and Alan Wheeler, Julianne Momirov, members of the Slow Food group – as well as any others who may have lent a hand.

In addition, on behalf of the women, men and children we work with in our partner countries around the world, I'd like to express my great appreciation for the ongoing support that your Congregation has given to USC Canada over the years. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible!

Celebrations

Today marks a very interesting moment in time, caught at the mid-point in between two very important global celebrations this week.

The celebration that most of us I suspect are already familiar with – Earth Day – will take place this coming Wednesday, April 22. It's a time to celebrate, both the Earth and its abundant natural resources – the plants, animals, minerals, soils and water – upon which our very existence depends. Human beings have not always been kind to the Earth, however, and many of us are fearful today of the type of planet that we may end up bequeathing to our children or our children's children.

A second celebration worth noting has just taken place this past Friday, April 17 – it is the International Day of Peasant Struggles, which I suspect few of us have heard of before. Peasants' Day pays tribute to small-scale farmers around the world and their struggles: to have access to land; to have access to seeds that they can save and replant each year; and in general, their struggles to have more control over their farming systems and livelihoods, and to be given the chance to be the able custodians of the Earth's resources that they are.



For more information on Dr Lotta's 100th, please visit DrLotta.ca

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Earth Day, Peasants' Day – in a way these two celebrations encapsulate the essence of what USC Canada's current work is all about. As our Mission Statement puts it, we promote “vibrant family farms, strong rural communities, and healthy ecosystems around the world.” And the way we do this is through our ground-breaking Seeds of Survival program, which I'll be speaking more of later on.

Before that, however, I'd like to make you aware of a third celebration, coming up later this fall. As some of you may already know, on November 28th, USC and Unitarians across Canada will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of USC's founder, Dr Lotta Hitschmanova. In my talk today, I'll also be drawing on Dr Lotta's inspirational story, to help explain how USC has arrived at the work we do today, the approaches we use and the values that underpin our work. For in a very real way, I believe, the seeds that Lotta first sowed for us in the mid 20th century are still being nurtured, saved and re-planted by USC in the 21st century!

Introducing Dr Lotta

For those of you who don't know Dr Lotta, she was a Czech-born World War II refugee who immigrated to Canada, founded the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada in 1945, and devoted the next 40 years of her life to USC and to making the world a “better, kinder place for all.”

Lotta was an undisputed leader in her time. She should be considered, in a real sense, as a “founder” of the international development movement in Canada. Thanks in large measure to her tireless efforts, a solid foundation for the Canadian public's increasing support to international humanitarian and development assistance was laid.

Her public service announcements from the 1960s and 1970s were instrumental in this regard.

***Lotta PSA [Track #1]:** This is Lotta Hitschmanova of the Unitarian Service Committee. Charity begins at home. Indeed it does. And then it goes on to embrace next door neighbours and all those who need help. So start by caring for those near you, and then give a thought, and if you can a dollar, to the children far away, who have no hope without your help.*

In an era before CNN news flashes, or other ways of hearing what was going on in the other half of the world, Lotta brought that world right into the church halls and living rooms of Canadians across the country. She made people care and she mobilized a whole generation to take action and help.

It's that kind of passionate energy that Lotta inspired in her day that we all need to draw on as we seek solutions to the environmental threats posed to our most treasured natural possession, our planet.

It's payback time

I recently came across a quote from another celebrated Canadian, Margaret Atwood, which seems to catch the essence of the path humans seem perilously headed towards as we exploit, unbridled, the Earth's resources.

“Mankind made a Faustian bargain as soon as he invented his first technologies.... [Over time, we have] increased the food supply ... by ... inventing ever newer and more complex technologies to do so... [However], the end result of a totally efficient *technological* exploitation of Nature would be a lifeless desert: all natural capital would be exhausted, having been devoured by the mills of production, and the resulting debt to Nature would be infinite. But long before then, payback time will come for Mankind.” [emphasis added]

I'd next like to introduce you to a provocative new video called *Hijacked Future*, which includes footage on USC's work in Ethiopia. *Hijacked Future* takes a hard look at the world's food supply system and concludes that it is in great peril, under threat from increased corporate concentration in the agriculture sector, and needs radical measures to right itself, before it's too late.

Not surprisingly the film's proposed solution is not more technology. But rather, going back to the basics. Working with, rather than against the environment. Starting with seeds. The very seeds that farmers have themselves bred over centuries, and that farmers each year save and replant. Which is where USC Canada's contribution to Earth Day and Peasants Day, and all that they stand for, comes in – our Seeds of Survival program.

It's all about food and agriculture

And it all started with Dr Lotta, as surprising as this may seem, at first glance.

For when people think of Lotta, they most often associate her with humanitarian assistance – the food aid, clothing and medical supplies that USC provided displaced or shell-shocked peoples in war-torn or post-conflict zones: places like post World War II Europe and Korea, in the 40s and 50s; or Vietnam and Bangladesh, in the 60s and 70s.

But USC in Lotta's day was much more than this. The organization evolved under her leadership, and education and training became key components of the work, as did community development – helping people help themselves.

Lotta PSA [Track #2]: Food, education, and community development strike at the very roots of poverty, disease and hunger. Fight need on every front with a contribution to the USC, 56 Sparks Street, Ottawa 4.

Lotta also gave support to agriculture throughout her career. As she put it in a 1974 interview:

“The USC has always been an immensely practical agency and to us food is the number one requirement of man. We have focussed on the need of food ... teaching how to produce more and better food practically since the beginning of the USC 29 years ago.”

Over several decades Lotta and the USC helped agricultural projects in Greece and India, provided emergency seed support to farmers in Vietnam, and funded seedling production in Indonesia. It's no wonder that following her death, Agriculture Canada released a new oat seed variety called AC Lotta in 1991.

USC today:

USC's largest, most-widespread program today is called Seeds of Survival. It's all about helping farmers to stay on their land, to grow more food for their families, to preserve the environment and to enhance biodiversity.

It started modestly enough, as a “seed rescue” operation after the big droughts in Ethiopia in the 1980s and has evolved into a global, farmer-led movement for environmentally sound agriculture – supporting women, small-scale farmers and youth in 12 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. I'm going to emphasize the “farmer-led” aspect of our work by quoting one of our USC Board members who reminded us yesterday that no scientist has ever domesticated wild plants and made them into edible crops – this has been the work of farmers!

I know we are all looking forward to the Slow Food lunch today after the service. In researching some of the material for today's talk, I was delighted to come across a couple of very interesting connections between our own Seeds of Survival program and the Slow Food movement.

I read in your congregation's April newsletter that Slow Food became an international association in 1989, which was the same year that Seeds of Survival also went international – when we started our annual international training workshops to train African sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation practitioners to establish their own programs in their home countries.

In addition, I discovered online that in 2003 Slow Food established its own Foundation for Biodiversity and that one of its Ethiopian partners is none other than USC's own long-standing Seeds of Survival partner, EOSA, the Ethio-organic Seed Action. It's a small world indeed.

Dr Melaku

At this point, I'd like to introduce you to another important champion within USC's Seeds of Survival story: Dr Melaku Worede. He was the Ethiopian gene bank director who spearheaded the founding of the Seeds of Survival program in the 1980s.

He was recently interviewed by Seedling magazine, and I highly encourage you to pick up a copy at our display table, if you are at all interested in this subject area. I'd just like to give you a couple of Melaku's quotes from the article:

“From a global perspective, the single focus of [modern] gene banks seems to be on collecting and preserving whatever samples they find, and they call that conservation. We, on the other hand, believe in conservation through use, in keeping diversity alive as you use it, without compromising the diversity already built up over centuries by the farmers.”

He went on: “We need diversity for food security, because uniformity is not secure. Imagine if you reduced all seed to one type – we will lose everything. One of the most important strategies that farmers have developed over the centuries is to spread the risk.... [using seed] varieties [that] will have enough plasticity to allow them to grow in diverse conditions. Diversity within the population is as important as between different crops.”

“Farmers have been the custodians of biodiversity, and they need support. It is high time there was much more funding for this work. We lose everything if we lose diversity in the field.”

Seeds of Survival today

To learn how USC is putting into practice the vision that Dr Melaku developed back in the 1980s, I encourage you to have a glance at our most recent Annual Report, or Jottings newsletter. There you'll see the wide variety of activities that our overseas partners are engaged in, all focused on local farmers and the seeds they save.

Activities like:

- Helping Bolivian farmers to re-establish their diverse, ancestral varieties of potatoes. We learned yesterday at our Board meeting of a unique potato variety with many eyes, which is given to new brides to peel, as a kind of test!
- We're also helping communities in Mali become more able to withstand the shocks of climate change by establishing village seed banks;
- helping young women to start up organic vegetable gardens in Bangladesh, giving them extra income and a wider nutritional base;

- helping farmers in Honduras to breed new, locally-adapted types of corn and beans;
- and countless other farmer-led initiatives around the world.

Seeds of Survival is not some esoteric enterprise, by the way – “1.4 billion people depend on the seeds that farmers conserve and replant each year.” Nor is biodiversity some kind of abstract concept – it has great social value, functioning as a kind of “insurance policy, broadening options and a farm family’s chances for a successful harvest.

“Farmers plant many different seed and crop types so at least part of a harvest will survive and there’ll be food on the table. Through careful crop selection and breeding, some of their seeds will be more resistant to drought, disease and pests. By conserving and sharing these seeds through community seed banks and seed exchanges, farmers also build reserves for planting if a natural disaster destroys the harvest.” [From USC’s Annual Report 2008]

And some fast breaking news for you.....My colleague Sheila has just returned from East Timor, where she witnessed the official opening of a community seed bank in the village of Kalohan. It’s a fascinating structure, built on stilts to protect against water and pest damage, and you can see a photo of it on our display panel at the back. The villagers have just named it the Dr Lotta seed bank, as they wanted a name that signified for them long-term and sustainable development – quite an honour indeed!

At our display table, you’ll also discover seed packets that I encourage you to check out – they have been donated by Canadian organic seed producers who support our Seeds of Survival program.

A focus on women

Dr Lotta has also been instrumental in planting another equally important seed in USC Canada’s value set: our focus on women in all the programs we support – in particular, Seeds of Survival.

Radio PSA [Track #3: Development often starts with a woman. Support leadership programs for women through the USC, 56 Sparks Street, Ottawa.

In a recent conversation I had with Lotta’s biographer, Clyde Sanger, he described her to me, in a most beautiful turn of phrase, as “an undeclared feminist.” That she was perhaps the most prominent Canadian woman of her generation is beyond doubt. But more than that, she pushed hard for women’s development, well before this became a UN buzzword in the 1970s.

In particular, she felt great empathy for young women and girls. Once their basic food, shelter and clothing needs were satisfied, Lotta and the USC were at the forefront of ensuring that they were offered meaningful educational opportunities.

USC today: Today USC continues this long tradition of putting women at the heart of our work and our overseas programs have increasingly focused on women and girls. From recognizing and valuing the role of women as seed savers and nurturers of biodiversity, in our Seeds of Survival program around the world, to the exciting life skills training for adolescent girls that our LEAD program has initiated in Bangladesh.

Here is an example from the West African country of Mali, taken from our most recent Annual Report. It is a chance to introduce you to yet another of USC’s champions, Aissata Ongoiba.

“Aissata [Ongoiba] has taken care of a community seed bank in Badiari village for about 14 years. Her neighbours save seeds from each harvest for deposit in this storage center, built to keep seeds healthy and useful when disaster strikes. Aissata’s passion and belief in this approach is impressive....

“Under her guidance, the bank has built a collection of 136 varieties of 11 different species of plant – all locally adapted and ideal for growing on parched West African soils. Well into the future, people in Badiari will have crops to grow. Aissata is now training another young farmer to run the bank as she begins a new phase of community outreach, working with 10 villages to enhance diversity in the region.”

Lotta would be thrilled to hear of this young woman’s success story, we can be sure.

Respect

Respect is another one of USC’s core values that Lotta felt very strongly about, and which still guides us when building partnerships within the Seeds of Survival program.

Radio PSA [Track #4]: *The USC believes that a voluntary agency must be thoroughly human and work from the heart, with compassion and understanding, but also with a maximum of professional knowledge. The USC believes a voluntary agency must never humiliate, but must create cooperation between human beings, so they can build a better tomorrow together.*

There is also an important St Catharines connection to make at this point. For in 1973, Dr Lotta was invited to give the Chancellor’s Lecture at Brock University. The topic was “The Art and Science of Aiding People.” In case your Congregation doesn’t have a copy, I’ll leave one here. In that talk, Lotta related that:

“...our USC is often called ‘Canada’s agency with a heart’, because we realize that we must not hurt the recipient by an insensitive method of offering our aid. I am coming back to the word partnership again; partners must be on the same level, otherwise the relationship is degrading both to the donor and to the recipient.”

USC today: USC today carries on this tradition, establishing meaningful partnerships with the individuals, groups and communities that we are working with today. Partnerships built on the utmost respect for the knowledge and skills that these peoples have themselves developed over centuries.

Indeed, one of our most basic values is to respect the time-tested, traditional knowledge of the farming communities we work with around the world. Our Seeds of Survival program has been conceived to build upon and work with, rather than against, these same traditional knowledge systems.

Sometimes traditional knowledge and wisdom can get lost, forgotten, or undervalued. USC through its Seeds of Survival program has put great energy into reversing this process:

- by encouraging knowledgeable farmers to exchange and pass on their expertise to other farmers;
- by developing arboretums in schools, where young people can learn the value of local tree species in environmental education programs; and
- by facilitating farmers at national and international forums to have a chance to speak out on issues dear to their hearts – like promoting the right to save their own seeds, or opposing the development of Terminator seeds, genetically engineered by seed companies to become sterile when harvested.

Empowering local people

Another fundamental approach that has stayed constant from USC's beginnings to the present day is the goal of empowering local people to manage their own development activities – which, in the context of Seeds of Survival, means people's right to develop and control their own farming systems, according to their own needs – what we tend to call, food sovereignty.

Radio PSA [Track #5]: By using indigenous staff and working through local partner agencies, we are able to eventually work ourselves out of a job, and move on to new projects.

Lotta believed very strongly in working with local partners. Indeed, she was a ground-breaker in this regard, working with field directors from the very partner countries USC was supporting, where other agencies were bringing in expatriates to run their programs.

As she put it herself in 1974:

“...We have completely reliable USC staff ... who know the problems and try their very, very best to solve them in their own social pattern and in their own culture and traditions...”

She also spoke [1973] of

“the necessity to develop local leadership... [It is] important to train indigenous experts, supervisors and leaders. It is **their** country which they passionately want to develop themselves. Self-help must be the ultimate objective of each project.”

USC today: This is still one of USC's core values, and a tradition that USC has maintained for almost 65 years now – with Canadians playing mainly “support” or “facilitator” roles.

Our approach continues to be to work with local partners to implement programs and to use national staff in our own offices.

Like Lotta, we firmly believe in development being in the hands of the people most affected themselves.

A social justice vision and call to action

Before concluding today's talk, I'd like to leave you with one final area of common ground that USC still shares with Dr Lotta, her clear vision – and dream – that she had for the future of our planet:

“...[My dream is] that one day the world will be a good place to live, not only for us in the North American continent but for everyone, everywhere in the world.... We are here for a function ... that has been entrusted to us and this is to make the world more liveable and it lies in our hands and I am absolutely convinced that it can be done.”

Though she didn't use the phrase herself, as far as I am aware, Lotta's vision also included a very clear “social justice” message underpinning it.

Lotta PSA [Track #6]: Scientists tell us there is no longer any excuse for human starvation, yet 2/3 of mankind remain hungry, while the world spends 150 billion dollars a year on armaments. Won't you invest a constructive dollar in the fight against need and poverty.

Lotta was never shy or afraid to voice her opinions or concerns about the conditions in which she found people in partner countries. Hers was a call to action – for governments, organizations and individuals to take a stand for human development and against war and injustice.

USC today: Since Lotta's time, USC and its Seeds of Survival program have continued to have a long tradition of speaking out in support of farmers' rights, women's rights, children's rights, and the like. We fight for a more just world, we oppose destructive forces like Terminator Seeds, we pose questions about the promotion of biofuels, and we raise awareness about the food, environmental and climate crises that the world is facing today.

And in the words of our current Executive Director, Dr. Susan Walsh:

"I was drawn ... to USC because I like its values, the values that drew Unitarians to Lotta's side 60 years ago... I read [your] list of principles and purposes.... You speak of dignity, the inherent worth of every person, justice, equity, compassion, peace, liberty, respect and community."

"These are the values that shaped the work of USC Canada. I hope that you know how important Unitarians have been to the development of USC Canada's social justice character."

Conclusion

To end the talk, I'd like to wish you all a very Happy Earth Day on Wednesday. Or, as they say in Bolivia – Happy "Pachamama" Day, Pachamama being the Goddess of the Earth! May it be a day when we collectively reflect on ways to be kinder to Nature and begin paying back the growing debt that we owe to our planet.

I also encourage you to pick up any of the printed or audio-visual materials on our Seeds of Survival program that we have at our display table – in addition to *Hijacked Future*, we also have a very recent film *Return to Nepal*, which features Bruce Cockburn and his journey back to Nepal in 2008. We have a sign-up sheet if you'd like to be put on our mailing list and receive updates on our overseas programs or the campaigns in Canada we are working on.

And if you're interested, I do warmly invite you to pick up some of our materials on Dr Lotta and her 100th anniversary, and to visit our DrLotta.ca website as we develop it further in the coming months.

Finally, I'd like to leave you on a lighter note, with a story that Dr Lotta herself recounted in 1973. It addressed the age old question as to why she wore that distinctive uniform of hers:

"...I only have it because it is so practical and the only real way of travelling to the areas where we have programs. This still confuses many, so I tell you what happened in an airport in Moncton a few weeks ago. A very old lady came to me and she was laden with parcels and she said, 'Are you a stewardess?' And I said no, but could I possibly help you? And she said, "No, thank you very much, but you look like you are doing something very useful, so here is 25 cents."

Thank you for listening.