

Talking Peace in Time of War
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“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. -Matthew 5:9

Talking peace in time of war – this season or any season – is not always easy.

Two brief stories. First story:

A few weeks ago I was standing with members of the South Shore Peace Forum at the weekly vigil in front of the post office in Hingham Square. A white car swerved towards the sidewalk. A young man leaned over to the window and yelled in the direction of a woman holding a sign that read “Support Our Troops – Bring Them Home.” His first words were an expletive which I won’t repeat. Then he shouted, “Does that mean my buddy died for nothing?!”

And he drove off.

Another woman, who was standing near me, not a regular at the vigil but a friend of one of the others, started to run after him. She clearly wanted to give him a piece of her mind. Fortunately, I think, for everyone, he was quickly down the road.

Second story:

This past week a number of us have been involved in an e-mail conversation concerning this morning’s guest speaker for the children invited by the Religious Education Committee – a major in the army reserves who has served in Iraq and who is scheduled for another tour of duty beginning about a year from now. Two or three members of our Old Ship community expressed reservations about his coming to talk to the children. Would he be promoting the war? Would he be wearing his uniform? Should he? And should someone from outside our Old Ship community be talking with our children about issues as sensitive and politically volatile as war and peace, and in particular about the war in Iraq? Who is this man, anyway?

The e-mails were lively and heartfelt – but consistently respectful.

Well, these two examples, both quite close to home, suggest just how challenging it can be to talk about peace in a time of war. Emotions often roil just below the surface.

When the young man shouted at us in front of the post office, I could certainly feel *my* blood pressure rise, instantaneously at that. But I also know that had the woman next to me, understandably upset by the man’s words and demeanor, been able to engage him in some sort of conversation before he drove off, things might likely have spiraled into more intense conflict – verbal combat.

After all, just imagine the place from which that man’s anger might have come. Of course I know nothing about him other than what I saw and heard; but if what he shouted from the car was true, he himself may have been a returned Iraq war veteran – or if he hadn’t been to Iraq himself, it may have been a boyhood friend, maybe his best friend, who had gone and had been killed there. Maybe just within the past few weeks.

And you don’t counter anger that comes from a place of such deep grief with your own self-righteous anger, returning insult for insult. That would hardly be peace-making in action, would not really be “talking peace.” But boy, it sure isn’t always easy to keep the blood pressure down, to remain calm, to be present to another person’s uncontrolled anger (and maybe your own anger too) without reacting in ways you would likely regret.

It isn't easy, but we have to try. After all, how can we expect our national leaders to respond sensibly and reasonably to a terror attack upon our shores, if we can't even keep our cool when someone shouts at us?

As for the Sunday School conversation. As a parent myself, I understand the concerns raised by a mother who has tried over time appropriately to shield her children from disturbing images of war and violence, and at the same time also has tried to teach her children that war and violence do exist in the world, and because they exist we must learn to respond from a place of peace and reason. And I understand the concern that perhaps someone from outside our community of Unitarian Universalist principles and values, someone from the military at that, might not be the best person to be a partner in our intergenerational talk about war and peace.

Well, the heartening news from *that* conversation, some via email and some person to person, is that everyone *stayed in the conversation*, stayed connected to one another; *and* the morning's program was further shaped in helpful ways based on the concerns and feedback expressed. Indeed, this morning's sermon is among the outgrowths of that conversation.

In short, we talked peace, we talked peacefully, and I think we all learned things from one another along the way.

So... it *is* possible to talk peace in time of war. Indeed – and of course – it is not only possible, it is essential.

For the cliché that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is simply not true. After all, I expect that each one of us at some time or another has been hurt by words. And we may have been guilty of hurting others with words, whether inadvertently or when our anger got the better of us. We've even seen how words can stir conflict on much larger scales as well, even among nations.

Words in fact can be a kind of weapon, even, ironically, when we claim to be talking about peace! And though our anger at our government's policies, or anger toward terrorists, may be understandable, it can lead us to say things that *increase* tension and conflict even as we claim to desire peace. Yes, words can be used as weapons; and these days we must learn to put aside weapons of any kind. The well-known Unitarian Universalist writer Mary Pipher reminds us of this in her new book, *Writing to Change the World*:

Language is weaponized when it is used to objectify, depersonalize, dehumanize, to create an “other.” Once a person is labeled as “not like us,” the rules for civilized behavior no longer apply.

And she goes on to point out that people across the political spectrum are too often guilty of such objectifying, such weaponizing of language:

Progressives as well as conservatives have their way of dehumanizing. They hurl stones when they use terms such as “fundamentalist,” “rednecks,” or “right-wing conservatives” in derisive ways that allow no room for nuances, individual differences, or empathy with their adversaries' points of view.

What then? How *ought* we to be talking peace? Let me continue to quote Pipher at length, because she puts so well something that is so important:

I am not interested in weapons, whether words or guns. I want to be part of the rescue team for our tired, overcrowded planet. The rescuers will be those people who help other people to think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded. They will be an antidote to those people

who disconnect us. They will de-objectify, re-humanize, and make others more understandable and sympathetic.

She concludes by affirming that it is a writer's particular responsibility to use words in ways that affirm the unique individuality of every person (what we UUs call the "inherent worth and dignity of every person") and to remind readers that we are connected to every other person as part of the family of humanity and the family of life.

Of course each one of us bears that same responsibility, whether or not we are officially writers. Each time we speak, each time we enter into conversation with another, we bear the responsibility not to make another person "other," not to sow conflict by creating separation and fear and hate, but instead to recognize one another as members of the same human family, and thereby be moved to sow peace with seeds of kindness and understanding and love.

It is a great responsibility, yet also a great opportunity.

How great an opportunity? Well, we heard earlier the passage from the Gospel of Matthew often called the Beatitudes, which include the familiar words, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

Now, it's easy to hear familiar words and let them wash over us without much thought. But reflect on these words. What a powerful assertion: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

Well, why should that be? Why should peacemakers be called children of God?

And after all, as good Universalists we might choose to affirm that *everyone* is a child of God, or part of the interdependent web, the family of life... whatever language you prefer.

But peacemakers rise to the responsibility that this suggests in a unique and powerful way; for peacemakers *behave* as you would expect a child of God to behave, speaking and acting in ways that affirm our intimate interrelatedness in the family of life and maybe inspiring others to speak and act in the same spirit. (And if we want, we can think of God as a metaphor for that interrelatedness, as a word which represents the highest of our ideals and aspirations, which suggests the best, the most fully human and humane that we can be.)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Well... all very nice in the abstract. But what about terrorism? What about Iraq?

Well, here's what I would write to that man in the car who yelled at us in front of the post office – in an effort to talk peace peacefully with him, and at the same time to try to explain my perspective on our nation's moral imperative to be a peacemaker – even, or especially, in such times as these. For there simply *must* be another way to peace, or, as A.J. Muste once said, "There is no way to peace... peace is the way.":

Dear Friend,

First, I am very sorry for your loss. A good friend can never be replaced. I can't begin to imagine what it is like for you. Of course I didn't know your friend, and I don't really know you, but I'm guessing that he was doing his duty as best he knew how, maybe trying to protect his buddies in his unit, trying to protect all of us for that matter. And whatever the exact circumstances, those are honorable motives. And nothing we do now as a nation – staying in Iraq, pulling out, whatever it might be, changes the honor with which he died or changes the grief you and others feel.

That said, it seems to me that the best way to honor your friend's life and his death is to do all we can to make the world a more peaceful place. You and I might well disagree with how to do that, but I expect we agree on the goal.

As for me, I happen to believe that the spiral of sectarian violence and terrorism in Iraq demonstrates that military force is not the answer to terror, that violence indeed almost always brings more violence. So I believe that we need to find a way to pull our troops out of Iraq, as we talk to leaders of neighboring countries, even our so-called enemies, bringing as many people to the table to talk peace as we can. And I believe too that we need to put more of our huge American resources into ending poverty and disease in the world and fewer of our resources into building up our military might; and that we need to put more of our ingenuity into developing alternative sources of energy and conservation and less into finding ways to drill for more oil and to have more control over oil that really isn't ours to begin with; and that we need to do more to heal divisions between people and to heal the planet, and do less which hardens divisions and harms the planet. In other words we need to be creating a planet-wide society that provides less fertile ground for growing terrorists in the first place.

And wouldn't being inspired to create such a better world be the best memorial to your friend? Wouldn't finally learning that more violence almost always leads to yet more violence be the best lesson we could learn from the loss of your friend, following the example of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and so many others? Wouldn't behaving as if we really are all connected in one family of life – all children of God, as some put it – be the most suitable way to honor your friend's courage and sacrifice?

Well, we might not agree on all of this, maybe not even on much of it. But we each do want peace. And we each feel pain and sorrow when we lose someone we love. Once again, my heart goes out to you.

Take care of yourself.

Peace.

*Yours sincerely,
Ken Read-Brown*

One last thought this morning. Yes, talking peace is important. But for many of us peace often *begins* when we make time to *stop* talking, begins when we make time for quiet and silence in our lives, turning off NPR or CNN, putting aside the Boston Globe or New York Times, putting aside our “to do” lists... and instead now and then pausing, and *feeling* – not anger or betrayal or frustration or fear or anxiety, but *feeling* our connection to one another (all children of God) and *feeling* our connection to the world of trees, fields, ponds, sea, deer, birds (all children of God)....

Then peacemaking *continues* with the next time we talk – talk to our neighbor – whether in front of the Hingham post office or through an email, whether at coffee hour or around the dinner table or the water cooler or in letters we write to public officials or newspapers – talk: respectfully, honestly, kindly, peacefully – humbly, too, acknowledging the complexity of issues of war and peace and much else besides, acknowledging that we could surely be wrong in our own opinions and perspectives.

And peacemaking continues, too, when we offer time or money to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, bring justice to the oppressed.

And peacemaking continues with all the ripples from our peacemaking, peace talking, peace acting... ripples we can barely begin to imagine... but which are real....

...this season as we proclaim “peace on earth”... and always.

So may it be.

