

Yearning for Peace
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the Quran

This verse, verse 255 of Surah 2, known as the throne verse, is a verse that Malala Yousafzai says she repeated and prayed often in the midst of the danger she and her family felt from the Taliban in their home village in Swat Valley Pakistan.

As we know, Malala, who is now sixteen, was shot just one year ago by the Taliban for her – and her father's - outspoken advocacy of education for girls. She now lives with her family in Birmingham, England, where she had been taken for medical care following the shooting:

This version of the throne verse is an interpretation (Muslims say there are no translations) by Thomas Cleary:

God!
There is no God but the One,
the Living, the Self-subsistent:
drowsiness does not overtake God,
nor sleep.
To God belongs
what is in the heavens and the earth:
who could there be
who can intercede with God
except by leave of God?
God knows what is in front of them,
and what is behind them;
but they do not comprehend
anything of God's knowledge
except as God wills.
The throne of God
extends over the heavens and the earth,
and the preservation of them both
is not oppressive to God,
for God is most exalted, most sublime.

The second reading is taken from *I Am Malala: The Girl who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban*, by Malala Yousafzai

Today I looked at myself in a mirror and thought for a second. Once I had asked God for one or two extra inches in height, but instead he made me as tall as the sky, so high that I could not measure myself. So I offered the hundred *raakat nafl* that I had promised if I grew.

I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest. By giving me this height to reach people, he has also given me great responsibilities. Peace in every home, every street, every village, every country – this is my dream. Education for every boy and every girl in the world. To sit down on a chair and read my books with all my friends at school is my right. To see each and every human being with a smile of happiness is my wish.

Sermon

To begin with, three stories on this Sunday before Veterans Day, stories of yearning for peace in the midst of war.

My father's younger brother, my Uncle Bob, joined the army during World War II and before long he had volunteered for the paratroops – and so was among those flown into what came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge near the end of the war.

Among his many fine qualities, Bob was known and loved for his sense of humor. In a letter home, August 1944, he wrote:

Thursday was the night [training] jump. Boy it was dark in that plane. I could just about feel somebody next to me. He got up and I decided to follow him. #""*! , I'll never follow that guy again! He took the first door to the right and we fell 1,000 feet into a peanut patch!

Well, as I said, Bob – a private – fought in the Battle of the Bulge, during which he was killed as he tried to pull his wounded sergeant back to safety. But though a warrior, and a courageous one at that, he dreamed and yearned for peace in the midst of war.

In another of his letters, this one to a friend, he had written this:

What I'm getting at Mac, is... that what I want to fight for now, and later – I might even wish myself on the ministry, you know – is not for the right for me to be a Presbyterian if I wish, but for everybody to worship God as they believe they should. And more than that, to respect the other guy's feelings and beliefs. Tolerance is the word. The way I see it, if we achieve tolerance we achieve world brotherhood. If we achieve world brotherhood, we achieve the eternal peace we seek.

Yes, my Uncle Bob was yearning for peace in the midst of war. Among the millions who have always yearned for peace in the midst of war.

I came of age during the Vietnam War – and in a family of peace-lovers, sometimes even activists, as most of you have heard before. I won't repeat those stories. Rather, I want to share a story I've only just learned.

Several years ago the diaries of a young North Vietnamese physician were recovered – that in itself is a beautiful story – and then about six years ago were published in English, under the title *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*.

As Frances Fitzgerald tells us in the preface: “The diary... begins on April 8, 1968, just two months after the Tet offensive. She is twenty-five years old, the chief physician at a field hospital in the mountains of central Vietnam.”

We learn of the physical conditions of hardship that she and so many others faced. We learn of the affection she had for her patients, the young men who had been often so severely wounded. We learn of friends who were killed in the war. We learn of her youthful passions and desires. We learn how beloved she was by other medical workers and by her patients.

And we read over and over again of her yearning for peace in the midst of war. She was no more a pacifist than was my Uncle Bob. She was committed to the cause of liberation, of freedom, as the North Vietnamese understood it, and she loved her homeland. But... and... she yearned for peace.

Here are a few entries from her diary:

Let's prepare our spirit to enter the last stage of battle, to see who will survive. Whether I live or die, the days of boundless joy will come when true peace returns to our nation. This gracious land has endured more than twenty fiery years of war and misery; so much of our blood and tears have been shed. We do not regret anything exchanged for freedom and liberty.

Oh, my country! When will these yearnings diminish, when will our country know peace?

Last night, a dream of peace came to me.... I dreamed of Hanoi... I dreamed of a music book... and I saw Dad, Uncle Hien, brother Bieu, and all my dear ones in the North.

Oh, the dream is not mine alone, but it's the dream of Peace and Independence burning in the hearts of thirty million Vietnamese and in millions of people around the world.

The most recent of my stories is the story of the sixteen-year-old Malala from Swat Valley, Pakistan, about whom we learned in the readings.

Hers is a story that is not just about her. Her parents have supported her every step of the way. And her father's dream from early in his life was to start a school, a school at which both boys and girls could be educated equally. He fulfilled this dream and instilled his values – values of freedom, of peace, of the importance of education *for everyone* – in Malala.

We have all heard of Malala, if not before she was shot, certainly afterwards. The news was so shocking to us when we learned that this young girl was shot on her bus going home from school, shot merely for believing that girls had an equal right to an education.

But hers is a story years in the making – as her father reached for his dream, as he and then Malala became public figures speaking out for peace and tolerance and the right

to education – which they continued to do even as the Taliban overtook Swat Valley, which made such public declarations fatally dangerous.

Let me share just a little more from Malala's book. Writing of the Pashtun ancient custom of feuds and revenge and violence, she says:

Our people say it is a good system, and our crime rate is much lower than in non-Pashtun areas. But I think that if someone kills your brother, you shouldn't kill them or their brother, you should teach them instead. I am inspired by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the man who some call the Frontier Gandhi, who introduced a non-violent philosophy to our culture.

Elsewhere Malala bemoans the ways in which people fight and kill in the name of religion. And she does not have supportive words to say about American drone strikes in her homeland.

And over and over again she affirms that education should be a right for everyone – "Islam too has given us this right," she declares, "Islam says every girl and every boy should go to school. In the Quran it is written, God wants us to have knowledge."

Yes, Malala, another who yearns for peace in the midst of war.

Don't we all? Can we, after all, possibly be content that war continues to rage on the planet, that Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, continue to die in suicide bombings and civil wars, that American young men and women continue to lose their lives half a world away, that American bombs fall on lands half a world away?

And are we content to know that however peaceful our own community might be, over half of our tax dollars go to fund war-making? Look at this strip of paper, quite graphically telling us where our tax dollars go. About 57% to the military... Not so much to education and health and other human services.

Is this the kind of nation, the kind of world in which we want to live? Do we, too, even though not on the front lines here in Hingham, here on the South Shore, do we not too not yearn for peace in the midst of war?

Back to the strip of paper. If you look at the pie chart for the federal budget that the government produces, it looks as though less than a quarter of the budget goes to defense.

What's going on?

Well, according to the War Resisters League, it's quite simple. Two things: The government pie chart does not include veterans' benefits as part of military spending. And the government pie chart does include trust fund expenditures – largely Social Security – as part of the operating budget. Both strategies diminish the apparent size of military spending. Which really is over half of the annual operating budget of our government. Why wouldn't they want us to know that?

Simple. Because we like to think of ourselves as a peaceful and peace-loving people – which in many ways we are. So if we saw, in a visual image, that over half of our tax dollars went to the military, well, it would create dangerous cognitive dissonance... and who knows where that might lead.

And talk about cognitive dissonance. What if it were more broadly known that when an American drone strike killed the leader of the Pakistani Taliban last week, the replacement for that man, chosen just the other day, was the very man who one year ago ordered the shooting of Malala, the very man who for years had terrorized the Swat Valley homeland of Malala's family and so many others, the very man who six years ago

torpedoed a fragile peace between Pakistan's government and the Taliban, the very man who has vowed not to enter peace talks now, the peace talks that had been about to begin.

What does that tell us about the wisdom of our strategy of killing off suspected terrorist leaders with drones?

Earlier this week some of us heard Bill Schulz, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, speak at Linden Ponds about human rights.

Bill quoted Robert Frost, who once said that poetry begins with a lump in the throat. Bill affirmed that the struggle for human rights also begins with a lump in the throat – the lump we feel in response to someone else's misery. So Bill asked us: In response to whose misery do we feel a lump in the throat?

The question applies to violence and war as much as to human rights in general, for we know that many of the most extreme forms of human rights violations take place in the midst of war's chaos and carnage.

So... for whom do we have a lump in our throats when it comes to violence and war on the planet?

Well, if our answer is for everyone who suffers in the midst of war... then what are we to do? We do live in one world, after all.

Well, my response is in old one, well expressed in an ancient Chinese text – paraphrasing: Wishing to cultivate peace in the world, cultivate peace in the nation; wishing to cultivate peace in the nation, cultivate peace in the community; wishing to cultivate peace in the community, cultivate peace in the family and in yourself; wishing to cultivate peace in yourself, cultivate peace in your heart.

Yes, first cultivate peace in the heart.

But of course we don't, must not, cannot stop there.

We move outward to family, community, nation, world, in whatever ways we are able, moved by our own yearning for peace – shalom, salaam, shanti, wholeness, wellness, happiness – to help create peace with our words, our emails and letters, our deeds, and our dollars.

We name honestly our own and our nation's complicity in war-making, our violent and racist history... and we seek other ways.

Our yearning for peace – which must include justice – is indeed ancient. It is timeless one might well say.

Even in the *Iliad*, that most violent of ancient stories, the death of one after another fighter was often paired with a vision of peaceful homeland and family to which the dying one had yearned to return.

My run one morning early this week brought me out of the woods to the top of Turkey Hill. From there I could see the city, the north shore the ocean, the Hull wind turbine... and the cows, near at hand, all facing the same direction.

Altogether, so it seemed to me, a living metaphor for peace, and for our universal yearning for peace.

May our heart's yearning – like that of my Uncle Bob, like that of the young Vietnamese physician, like that of Malala's, turn to creating the peace we seek.

So may it be.