

Reflections on Peace

December 14, 2008
Rev. Victoria Ingram

December days embrace so many traditions, so many celebrations from the diverse cultures and heritages of the world. We celebrate the turning of the wheel of the year and anticipate the winter Solstice. All of us respond to the changes in the physical world around us at this time. It's darker for more hours of the day. The weather is colder and we are more inclined to slow down and cuddle up. Traditionally, winter has been a time when life slows down, allowing time for reflection, pondering, and planning.

In the Christian tradition, today is the third Sunday of Advent, the season of waiting and anticipation that comes before the birth of Jesus, called the Prince of Peace. The season of Advent invites contemplation on the meaning of this impending birth – what would it mean to live with peace as a constant reality in our lives?

This morning's opening words are adapted from those of students at the Lincoln School, who were asked to reflect on the meaning of peace. It might not surprise you to learn that the Lincoln School was founded in 1884 as a Quaker institution, a school for girls and young women, to prepare them to be better citizens of the world. Our Quaker brothers and sisters' heritage, like our own, includes a commitment to peace and non-violence. Contemporary Quaker and peace advocate Gene Knudson Hoffman tell us that "peacemaking is a healing process and it begins with me, but it does not end there."

To that end, I want to tell you about the denominational efforts underway to serve the process of making peace a reality in the world.

At this time, Unitarian Universalist congregations are being invited to consider the issue of peacemaking, specifically in response to a UU Statement of Conscience presented at General Assembly in 2008 on the issue of the resolution of violence. Peacemaking is one of our denomination's current Congregational Study Action Issues, phrased as a consideration of the following statement:

Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?
Here is the statement's background and reasons given by the Study/Action group for focusing on this issue:

As the human population has increased there has been a corresponding increase in contact between groups of people who were largely isolated from one another in the past. This contact, coupled with differences in politics, religions, moral values, and beliefs as well as economic injustices and competition for resources, have led to countless conflicts around the world. Humankind struggles to achieve peaceful coexistence economically, socially, politically, and spiritually.

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of involvement in speaking and working for peace, disdaining violence and war as a “solution” to the wrongs and injustices of the world. We stand on the side of love, and yearn for a time when the power of love is stronger than the love of power. Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Peace cannot be achieved through violence, it can only be attained through understanding.”

While each of us as UUs may exercise our right of conscience and hold different opinions, the Study/Action group states that “historically, Unitarian Universalists have agreed with the theory and practice of "just war," or use of force in self-defense to preserve the life of another person. However, we have also supported peace and disarmament in over eighty resolutions since our merger in 1961. We offer counseling for conscientious objector status. [In our understanding of the need for peace, we] call on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Mahatma Gandhi, the Buddha, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our principles are models for peacemaking yet we act as if violence is more effective than nonviolence in certain situations. As a religious denomination, we need to clarify our position and apply our covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” (www.uua.org/csw)

In discussing this vital issue, a draft statement of conscience has been developed for response by UU congregations. It begins with these words: “War is abhorrent. Violence is reprehensible. Human history has been marked by both. Religion has been a catalyst for war and for peace, sanctioning behaviors individual and international. What is our religious response as Unitarian Universalists to the historic habits of war and the timeless challenges of peace? Should we reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war and affirm a commitment to seek just peace through non-violent means? Should we continue with the more conventional practice of seeking peace through application of "just war" criteria? Are these our only options as we seek to promote "a world community of peace, liberty, and justice for all?" This Statement of Conscience results from widespread deliberation and presents an approach arising out of our history, theology, and understanding of human nature for building a peaceful, just, and sustainable global future.”

I encourage you to review this important UU resolution, which you can find by searching “peacemaking” at the UUA website. I’ll be asking for more of your input and feedback in the near future, so that we can provide input into the Statement of Conscience process as a congregation.

Human history is full of violence, just as it is filled with examples of compassion and cooperation. Each of us is familiar with the emotions of hate and love, anger and forgiveness. We can make choices about our actions, even when our emotions are involved. We can choose to engage in dialogue, to seek peaceful means to resolve conflicts, to embrace non-violence and stand on the side of love.

Many of you in this congregation made that commitment and have your own history of action and advocacy for peace. This morning, I’ve asked Charlie Walton to talk about his

involvement with the San Jose Peace Center, and why he has chosen to involve himself in a life-long campaign for peace.

CHARLIE

In May, we will host in this pulpit as Sunday speakers a group of young people who participate in a peace essay contest Charlie sponsors in local schools each year. One of Charlie's goals in sponsoring this essay contest is to encourage young people to think, to think of life lived in peace, and to encourage them to work toward creating that vision as they mature and take responsibility for the world.

Former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan said this about our responsibility to the larger world: "There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace."

Our work for peace is vital to not only our lives, but to the lives of our children and our children's children. The effort we put into making peace a reality is not in vain. Our commitment to peace creates possibility, a open place in our life for possibility and hope, for kindness and connection. Black Elk gives us a clue of where to start: "The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."

To achieve peace in the world, we must, ultimately, as Lao Tse told us in our chalice lighting reading, create and nurture peace within our own hearts. In this season of Advent, in the darkening of the year, I wish for you to find times of rest and reflection, times when you feel the oneness of all things, times when deep peace floods your heart and mind.

I leave you with this blessing from the Gaelic Runes:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of this shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.