

Opening

We are here
to celebrate life with freedom,
and to wrestle with the truths of our world
that we might grow wiser,
and dare to struggle for peace exactly as much
as we imagine it. And so, we begin our worship:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

The Sequence

Let's play a game for a while, you and I.
Let's close our eyes, and imagine what the world around us would look like if war stopped
and peace began.
Not just that war overseas, but the wars here too,
wars between those who know they are right
and smirk,
and those who know they are right
and roll their eyes.

I didn't tell you it would be an easy game,
now, did I?

If war really stopped,
a lot of other things would probably
have to stop too...
not only wouldn't we see so many funerals

for young men and women,
with all the wailing and red, red eyes,
circling in mothers and fathers and friends,
but we wouldn't see hungry people in line
at Faith Mission anymore, or people begging
not just for spare change, but just for a chance to be visible.
We would give up a lot, I suppose;
some pride, sure;
but also the joy of being cynical,
or the strategy of hiding under a security blanket of mere shame or
denial.
We would have to live out in the open a lot more, unlocking the doors to
our most
vulnerable heart.
We'd probably have to give up cringing
for good.
The words "them" and "us" might have to go on vacation for a while (at
least when they occur in the same sentence).
And we might have to make friendships,
not because we share a common enemy,
but because we actually want to get to know people who are actually
different from us.

It's a tough game, imagining the end of war, isn't it? Yet it's one of the
best games I know.
And now the silence is almost here,
so the game's over for a time.
But, I pray, just a short time.... silence

Peace to all in our lives. Those we love, those
we find hard to love, those we miss, those we
long for. We say their names in peace, aloud or quietly inside us, so that
the peace with which we would embrace them has a real beginning...

naming

Music is the joyous game which silence plays with sound, which heart plays with word. It too is difficult; but like most things difficult, it is also beautiful.

The First Reading is in two parts. The first part comes from the Scroll of Sh'muel, called the Books of Samuel in the English Bible. These tales, although based on saga, both oral and written that go back centuries, were finally put down in the written, form we have, around the same time as the Torah, namely, about 500 years before the beginning of our era.

All of the elders of Israel came together at Ramah, and there they said to the prophet Sh'muel, "You are very old now, and your children are not following your path. So we want you to appoint a king for us, a king just like all the other nations have."

This request irked Sh'muel. So, after going to the Eternal in prayer, he warned them against their request in this way: "So, you want a king. Let me tell you how kings do business. First, they take away your sons to be warriors and charioteers. Some he will make into officers over fifty or a thousand. Others he will use to farm *his* fields, reap *his* harvest, and make weapons and other equipment for *his* battles. Then, the king will take your daughters for cooks and bakers, and to design perfumes for his concubines. Then he will tax you to get ten-per cent of your choicest fields, which he will give to those who flatter him. He will take a tenth part of your wine and grain, and hand it all over to those who court his good will. He will take your servants away from you and make them his own. In other words, I am telling you that a day is going to come when you will cry out in pain because of this king you have elected, and on that day, the Eternal is not going to care one whit, because you brought it on yourselves."

But the people would not listen to Sh'muel's warning. "No," they said, "we want a king over us, so we can be just like the other nations. Let our king rule over us, and lead us into his battles."

And the second part of the first reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew (c. 85), a short phrase which no peer-reviewed scholar doubts actually goes back to the historical Jesus himself, thus the Latin technical phrase Ipsissima Verba Iesu.

Love your enemies.

The Second Reading comes from the book Continuities in Cultural Evolution (1964) written by the famed anthropologist, Margaret Mead.

Our human situation no longer permits us to make armed dichotomies between those who are good and those who are evil, those who are right, and those who are wrong. The first blow dealt to our enemies' children will sign the death warrant of our own.

Sermon

One of my roommates in seminary, Roger, was raised in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. He was given a good religious education, certainly, but reading the Bible from cover to cover was not part of that education. Oh, he knew about Noah and Jesus and Moses, but just the big stories...the ark, the manger, the plagues.

I, on the other hand, was not raised in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. So I had a very different kind of religious education. I had to read the whole Bible from cover to cover several times...every begat, every psalm, every word in the gospels and the letters of Paul.

So one day, close to the beginning of the semester, Roger came back to our apartment to tell me about this class he was taking with the great Robert Bellah over at the University of California, with which we had cross-registration.

“It's a course in Western Classics. We are going to read Dante's *Inferno*, Augustine's *Confessions*, the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer, and the *Gospel of Matthew*.”

“We had to read all those things in high school,” I said. “But I would have to read them over again, 'cause I don't remember much about them. But, since I heard the gospel of Matthew over and over again in church, I practically have that memorized. I wouldn't have to re-read that again at all.”

“I've never read it,” said Roger, plainly.

“Really?” I was genuinely surprised. “Well,” I said, “I know a lot about it, so if you get confused about what you are reading, I might be able to help you figure it out.”

“Deal,” said Roger.

Later that month, Roger was in his room studying. Steady, serene Roger, a very good student. Suddenly I heard him cry out “I didn't know he said that!” And then, “I can't believe it! How can it be that I never heard that he said that?”

I was surprised to hear Roger expressing himself dramatically, since that was usually my department.

“Roger, what's going on? Are you having a nervous breakdown or something?”

“No, I am just surprised that Jesus said all this stuff. I mean, it's pure Gandhi. Non-violence, anti-war and all that. 'Love your enemies!' he said. I am just astounded.”

Roger, you see, had been a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War era. He had received a very high number during the first draft lottery (remember that awful day?) and really didn't “have” to pursue CO status. But he insisted on getting it anyway, because for him, this

refusing to kill approach wasn't just a matter of luck, a mere lottery...it was a matter of deep religious principle. He simply did not believe in killing other human beings. For any reason. And even though the Unitarian Universalist Association is not one of the historic Peace Churches under U.S. Law, like the Society of Friends, or Quakers, and the Mennonites, he was granted CO status partially because he was so articulate about how he had made Gandhi's spiritual philosophy and A.J. Muste's pacifist philosophy his own. And Roger always demonstrated that he took this non-violent way of life seriously. I mean, he was tested many, many times. And he always passed the tests with flying colors. Roger wouldn't ever claim to be the new Gandhi, but he would certainly tell you how much living by Gandhi's principles made a difference to him.

Roger was raised Unitarian Universalist. William Howard Taft, both President of the United States and a Supreme Court Justice, was also raised Unitarian, before, that is, the 1963 consolidation of the Unitarians and Universalists. He was active in his home congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio when he was a young man. Very active. And he was active later, when he returned to Cincinnati to be a circuit court judge after living in Washington D.C. for a while. In D.C., he attended All Souls Unitarian Church, which is still a very influential congregation in that august city. When he was President, and also a Supreme Court Judge, he attended church there regularly. It was the minister at All Souls who eventually did his funeral. (During his election process, by the way, he got a lot of flack for being a Unitarian, from the religious right of his day.)

When what we call the First World War was brewing and beginning, President Wilson was all for American participation in that war. So was William Howard Taft, even though Wilson had soundly defeated him in the last election. At the time, Taft was the Moderator of the American Unitarian Association, what we might call today "the Board Chair." He was also a very articulate Unitarian, theologically. He totally supported the war, and based that support on his understanding of Unitarian principles. He proposed a resolution at the General Conference (what we now call a General Assembly). In it, he asked Unitarians nationwide to support President Wilson's war efforts.

The Rev. John Haynes Holmes was minister at Community Church (Church of the Messiah, it was called back then) in New York City, which was a Unitarian Church. Holmes was also articulate theologically. He was very focused on social justice, and during his ministry he helped to found the ACLU (the American Civil Liberties Union), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. His understanding of Unitarian principles led him to a pacifist position about that first Great War and yes, any war for any reason whatsoever. He wanted to have the General Conference where Taft was Moderator pass a resolution for reconciliation and peace. He was soundly defeated, and Taft's resolution won the day handily.

Holmes was discouraged, and resigned his membership in the Unitarian Ministers' Association, and even wanted to stop calling his church a Unitarian church. Holmes' congregation was loyal to him and supported him in his decision to leave the Unitarian ministerial association. Sadly, almost all the other pacifist Unitarian ministers who shared Holmes' convictions were let go by their congregations, who all tended to be in support of the war. Holmes would eventually allow himself to be listed as a Unitarian minister again, but he never regretted that he resigned his membership for a goodly number of years.

Some years later, during the Vietnam War, many of our ministers came out against that war. John Evans, who served both this church and my former congregation during that era, was soundly against that war from the very beginning. But things had changed among Unitarians, and now, the Unitarian Universalists. Many congregations were filled with people who criticized the Vietnam war without ceasing, leading marches and attending protests. But there were still many among us who felt that the ministers and congregations went too far, and who resigned their membership just over this issue.

The present war in Iraq has been largely condemned by what seems to me to be the majority of Unitarian Universalists across the nation, including those who have grown children serving in that war. But even though that's true, there are still folks who feel that there might be some

moral good that could come out of it yet, and who are uncomfortable with the basic anti-war sentiment found in our congregations.

So this morning I want to explore the religious groundings of such vastly different attitudes. I did a lot of reading this week on this subject, and believe me, I am convinced that the whole history of religion's association with both war and peace *throughout the world and throughout all of human history* has always been simply a larger version of the Unitarian conflict I described between Taft and Holmes.

The Qu'ran, the holy book of the Muslims, talks about *jihad*, a word which means *striving*, and yes, war-like people interpret the word *striving* as *warfare*; but peace-loving Muslims, like the Sufis and the Mazziyariya community, interpreted the very same passages in a pacifist way.

The New Testament records the authentic words of Jesus as "Love your enemies." Inspired by this very clear ethic, the earliest Christians were strict pacifists, and were thrown to the lions for that more than anything else, to wit, refusing to go to war at the behest of Caesar. That all changed once the church married the state in the days of Constantine. Still, even though this church/state union was a calamity, many were the Christian bodies which resisted the tide of church blest warfare. The Mennonites, the Amish, our own ancestors, the Socinians of Poland and Lithuania, the Quakers and many Catholics and Protestants have taken this seriously and preached against war utterly as un-Christian. Yet others, like Gratian and Thomas Aquinas crafted "just war" theories of great sophistication, and popes like Innocent the Third and Protestant leaders like Zwingli, and Anabaptist firebrands like Thomas Muntzer believed that war and Christianity could walk hand in hand without embarrassment no matter what Jesus said. And yet, even today, after all the bloody Christian vs Christian wars in Europe (and the undeclared Christian war against the Native religions here), I can see, in this very parking lot, the wonderfully pacifist bumper sticker, "When Jesus said 'Love your enemies, I think at the very least he must have meant 'Don't kill them.'"

The Hebrew scriptures contain anti-war passages of stunning clarity, like Psalm 46, for example:

“From the end to end of the whole earth, God stamps out war, breaking the bows, snapping the spears, casting all shields into the flames.”

Or you have the amazing story you heard this morning from the scroll of Samuel, which, in a surprising anarchistic way, condemns the whole idea of state leadership under a single sovereign as a pattern that leads inevitably to war, taxes, slavery and the whole subjection of a national economy to the whims of the powerful and self-serving.

But, at the same time, you will find passages where God is called “a warrior,” who “shatters the enemy,” (Exodus/Shemoth 15), and you will hear narratives of God commanding the Hebrews to murder civilian populations. Because of the prevalence of anti-Jewish thought in Christian cultures, most folks are aware of these murderous passages, and unaware of the pacifist passages, which outnumber the former. So please be very, very careful in your utterance, and avoid saying things to me like “The Old Testament God is cruel and brutal and warlike, whereas the New Testament God is all sweetness and light.” It’s simply not true, and is a form of systemic Christian anti-Jewishness which even Unitarian Universalists can be prone to.

Still, the dichotomies among the Jews are just as real as for the Christians. For example, the later Talmudic rabbis maintained that “Whoever sheds blood diminishes the presence of God in the world.” (Gen. Rabbah 34:14) But, despite this clear opinion, others continued to support the idea of *milchamet chovah*, or obligatory war.

How about the African religions in all their variety? War is often accepted as part of life, but many religious groups isolate the warrior who has killed for a period of time to purify him. Others have an important religious leader wash the bodies of the soldiers, and sacrifice an ox to remove the ghosts of their victims from their presence. War is both seen as necessary and unfortunate, that is, *an unfortunate need and curse*, never a “blessing and a curse.”

Over the centuries, the various Hindus have produced scriptures that are actually set in the midst of wars, like the Bhagavad-Gita. And wars have indeed pocked India's long history. Yet this religious tradition also lifted up the word ahimsa, or non-violence, as a central focus, a focus which burned molten hot in the heart of Gandhi and many others. I find it interesting though that even Gandhi referred to his non-violent demonstrations using military terms, and believed that conflict was never to be avoided, but always faced, and that even violence was better than cowardice.

The Buddhists are perhaps the most clearly peaceful religious people on the planet.

Although there are not many scriptures that actually talk much about social issues in the modern sense of the word, there is a clear teaching against all war, per se, in the *Brahmajala Sutra*, where it is clearly taught that it is a sin, an error, even *to watch* a battle, which would make most American television watchers sinners all, since violence and battles are as commonplace on television as shells are on a beach. Still, in north Asia, Buddhist monks disregarded such teachings in great numbers, joining the secular military on expeditions that in no way could be considered just. And some Buddhists have justified killing because according to the Buddhist teaching, no human being has an *atta*, or an atman, or an eternal self. Therefore, since there is no self, there is no one who is really being killed. A strange circular argument, I'll admit, but one that enabled members of this most peaceful of religions to nonetheless enter the throes of war. These remain exceptions to the rule, however. Ashoka of India, one of the greatest world leaders in the whole history of humanity, was so converted by the peaceful teachings of Buddhism that his imperialist violent youth gave way entirely to a wise eldership that peacefully transformed the whole of South Asia for centuries. He raised stone tablets to confess and describe his remorse for his past wars all over India.

The Shintos of Japan were a military religion from the beginning, without either scripture or prophet, a religion based on nature's

monuments, like mountains and streams, and the majesty of the seasons. Yet among the Shinto, there too developed pacifist sects like Konko-Kyo. And in China, among both the Daoists and the Confucianists, you have a variety of opinions, ranging from warrior handbooks to denouncements of all force.

In short, no matter where you go in human history, you will find people who claim for themselves a religion or philosophy with principles or practices or beliefs and cultures. Some of these, who for a variety of cultural, familial and even biological reasons, are prone to violence, read violence into their scriptures or customs. Those prone to peace for other reasons read peace in the self-same scriptures, or find peace supported by the self-same customs. This nearly universal fact tells me why Buddhism, although it has produced some warriors in its history, has produced so few by comparison to other religious or secular ideologies. Because, you see, Buddhism teaches the cultivation of personal selflessness, and a balanced inner peace, first and foremost. Going inward to ferret out the tendencies, or even possibilities of, violence within, is an everyday practice for sincere Buddhists. If you do that first, even if you read a scripture which sounds violent, you will turn the page until you find a scripture or practice that expresses your own inner peace.

After all, scripture does not interpret me. I have to interpret scripture.

Me, personally, I am a Unitarian Universalist. I wasn't raised one like my friend Roger, but I trust that my 38 years within this tradition has grounded me more and more in reason as a religious approach, and tolerance as an initial and necessary practice for any spiritual deepening. So while everyone else is free to come to their own principled conclusions about war and peace, so am I. And Margaret Mead expresses my consistent reasoning these last 38 years very well. "The first blow dealt to our enemies' children," she writes, "will sign the death warrant of our own." In other words, if you make war on me for ANY reason, and kill my child, my friend, my mother, my uncle, my second cousin twice removed...I am going to probably want very much to declare war on you. And kill you and yours, since the foolishness of

revenge has only rarely been successfully fought off in the last ten thousand years of human history. And then, when I have wiped out those whom you love, you would have to declare war against me. And so it will go on for another ten thousand years, mutual murder to no end. Until someone decides to stop it. (And here I have to remind everyone that in the country of the present war, 50% of the population is under 15 years of age. In other words, it's a nation of children.)

People always bring up the Second World War when I say this. Yes, I understand. It was terrible. Hitler was a monster in the literal meaning of that term. I do not question that in the least. He certainly needed to be stopped. And they bring up the murder of the Jews, Gypsies, Gays, and non-cooperative Catholics, Protestants and Communists, in death camps. "We HAD to go over there and stop all that murder." But you know, these very same Jews were not welcomed at our door steps here in the States. We knew what the danger was. We sent many ships away, back to Germany and death. Our immigration folks certainly didn't care much about those refugees we were supposedly fighting for. And we never bombed the railway lines to Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen et al, which wouldn't have killed anyone's child or mother, just twisted some metal. And that twisted metal would probably have saved a million lives. But we DID bomb places like Dresden into molten slag in which almost 40,000 mostly civilians burned to ash. So, I'm sorry, even when people bring up the justice of a war, I find I will continue to remain cautious. Even in a war for which a case might be made to call it just, or at least necessary, there is much injustice.

I am not Mahatma Gandhi. Not even close. But I still have to think that his approach to conflict merits more meditation. Or that we could meditate on a thousand other approaches that don't end up with charred children. I am not convinced war has ever changed anyone's mind any more than burning someone at the stake changes his or her mind. It just kills them, not their heresy. And in the same way, killing children doesn't change anyone's politics, but plants the seeds for the next war.

Well, I've gone on and on. But I hope you get at least this. If you want

external authority to support violence and war, you can always find it. If you want external authority to wage peace, you can find it in a thousand holy books. But why not, I ask today, like my friend Roger, find an *internal source of* authority to make the practice of peace your own?

Offering (Steve extempore)

Lullaby “When They Sleep” by Rolf Jacobsen
a Norwegian poet.

All people are children when they sleep.
There is no war in them then.
They open their hands and breath
In that quiet rhythm heaven has given them.

They pucker their lips like small children
and open their hands halfway,
soldiers and state leaders, servants and masters.
The stars stand guard, and a haze veils the sky
during those few hours
when no one does any harm.

If only we could speak to one another then,
when our hearts are half open flowers.
Words like golden bees would drift in.
O God, teach me the language of sleep.