

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Making Peace with Our Spirituality”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 7, 2008

Sermon

This is the fourth in a series of sermons on peace making. [The first](#) coincided with the dedication of our Peace Pole. It focused on the origin of the peace pole and the inspirational phrase, "May Peace Prevail on Earth." [The second](#) introduced Marshall Rosenberg's theories of nonviolent communication through a dramatization of an argument about dishwashing performed with my wife Philomena. [The third](#) sermon, timed the Sunday before the election, explored James Gilligan's ideas about preventing violence. Gilligan argued strongly for the role of shame in generating violence and the potential to make peace through uprooting the sources of shame and humiliation in our culture.

Whether making peace with our planet, our relationships or in the larger culture, difficulties most assuredly will arise. As I discussed in my sermon on [the evolution of forgiveness](#), both revenge and forgiveness seem to be programmed into our DNA. To engage in peace making, we need to develop inner resources to resist the urges toward violent behavior and redirect that energy into peace making behavior. Developing those inner resources, I'll be referring to as our "spirituality." Our spiritual resources connect us to our highest purpose and meaning when the evidence of the value of that purpose and meaning is unseen and unfelt.

The first place I turned when I was thinking about what wisdom I could share with you about developing the inner resources to resist violence and make peace were the celebrities of non-violence. The names that immediately came to mind are people like Gandhi and Dr. King. The apostle of nonviolence I heard at General Assembly last June who I found very inspiring is a radical Jesuit priest named John Dear. [His web site](#) hails him as a Peace Activist, Organizer, Lecturer, Retreat leader, author/editor of 20 books on peace and nonviolence, who Archbishop Desmond Tutu has nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. I bought several of his books, which are inspiring, but clearly grounded in Catholic theology.

As I was reading the books, I wondered to myself, "Who are *our* peace making heroes? What Unitarian Universalists have proclaimed the cause of peace that I could bring to your attention?" So I wandered up to Joy Library and began pulling books off the shelf looking for once widely known and respected voices who, today, are lost to our attention. I found three ministers that I'd like to bring to you this morning from both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our heritage.

I want to bring them to you because, inspiring as Gandhi, King and Dear are, they are *not* rooted in our religious tradition. They do not approach their faith quite in the same way we do. While we share many common values, the beliefs that support those values may differ. While our beliefs today may *also* differ from these three long dead Unitarian and Universalist ministers, they are part of our heritage and more intimately connected to our religious approach.

The differences can be seen as we consider the one guiding light, the prince of peace who inspired them all, Jesus of Nazareth. Gandhi approached Jesus from Hinduism, King from Baptist Protestantism and Dear from Catholicism. Adin Ballou, John Haynes Holmes and Theodore Parker all have Universalist and Unitarian approaches. And that will have consequences for their approach to peace making.

Adin Ballou's pacifism was based on his commitment to Jesus's teachings as he found them in scripture that most closely matches Christian pacifists. Born at the beginning of the 19th century, he founded the utopian community at Hopedale, Massachusetts. Both a Universalist and Unitarian minister and tireless reformer, he sought to bring his liberal Christian and socialist vision of society into practice. Leo Tolstoy had Ballou's words translated into Russian and incorporated them into his writings that influenced both Gandhi and Dr. King.

In his 1846 book titled *Christian Non-Resistance*, he outlined the theological underpinnings to his pacifism. The primary scriptural prooftext comes from the sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-41 and 43-44):

Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. [Matt. 5: 43-44]

If you're going to take Jesus seriously as your teacher, these passages are hard to reconcile with being violent.

John Haynes Holmes served what today is called Community Church of New York City for 50 years beginning in 1907. He is remembered for helping found the NAACP, the ACLU, the American branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice. He advocated for the work of Mahatma Gandhi and took strong stands in his preaching and writing. An admirer noted that he was "accused of many things during his life, but never of being moderate."

Holmes also grounded his non-resistance (a word he disliked because it carried the connotation of passivity) in the Sermon on the Mount. He didn't take the phrase *resist not evil* as literally as Tolstoy and Ballou did. Holmes liked Paul's interpretation of the passage in the Letter to the Romans that advised: *Recompense to no man, evil for evil.*

Holmes took a pacifist stance in both World Wars for which he was vilified by many. In 1916, he wrote a book arguing for “non-resistance” titled, [New Wars for Old](#). In the preface he wrote:

I believe that the law of love should be obeyed even though it lead always to death, as it did in the case of Jesus. I take it for granted, however, that this idealistic part of my argument needs no advocacy. Everybody agrees that the counsel of the spirit is right, but the question remains, Will it work? Men balk because they are certain that this gospel will not stand the pragmatic test.

One of those who balked was Theodore Parker the controversial Transcendentalist minister of the mid 19th century. Rejected by his Unitarian colleagues for his liberal theological views, he worked fervently for abolition of slavery.

He looked at the Sermon on the Mount a little differently than his pacifist colleagues. In an 1852 letter, he argued if Jesus had known that the end times were not going to happen in his lifetime, he would have changed some of his teaching. It is inappropriate for us to translate words like “resist not evil” and “take no thought of the morrow,” spoken to a first century audience expecting a world without a future, to still apply almost two thousand years later.

Parker writes:

Yet I think violence is resorted to nine times when it is needless to every one instance when it is needed. I have never preached against the doctrine of the non-resistants, but often against the excess of violence in the state, the church, the community, and the family. I think cases may occur in which it would be my duty to repel violence by violence, even with taking life. Better men than I am think quite differently; and I respect their conscientiousness, but [I] must be ruled by my own conscience, and, till otherwise enlightened, still use violence, if need be, to help a fugitive [slave].

So where are we today? As I've mentioned before, the Unitarian Universalist Association has been considering whether or not to make a “Statement of Conscience” on the issue of peacemaking. October 30th the Commission on Social Witness released [a draft](#) for such a statement that can be found on the [uua.org](#) web site. I've reviewed it and our congregation is encouraged to review it too and return our comments to the Commission. The statement will be amended and voted up or down at this year's General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah this coming June.

Parsing the whereas's and therefore-be-it-resolved style language often found in these statements that try to balance various perspectives, one phrase jumped out at me: just peacemaking. Protestant and Catholic religious leaders rethinking how to make peace developed the term in the 1980's. They believe we need an approach beyond just war theory and pacifism. We need proactive peacemaking policies that prevent war from starting in the first place.

So what might the spiritual underpinnings of just peacemaking look like interpreted on the personal level? I'd like to suggest six touchstones for personal just peacemaking, a synthesis of all my inner and outer exploration of this subject:

1. The most important first step is the decision to choose nonviolence as the primary principle of how you will live in the world. This isn't a decision made once but a commitment returned to and renewed again and again. It is a faith commitment because the world is full of countervailing messages that will urge you to fear, hate and strike out again and again. Confidence in the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha and other great teachers help to make and renew this commitment.
2. To be a peacemaker, one must develop the capacity to be aware of the urge to be violent and develop the capacity to restrain the impulse. This exercise in self awareness requires the peacemaker to develop a sensitivity to their inner life using one of the many disciplines that allows us to accurately view our inner emotional landscape. Feelings are extremely powerful, subtle and crafty. Feelings need not dictate our behavior. This is the work of a lifetime.
3. The most powerful antidote to the urge to violence is the felt experience of compassion. Almost all of us can expand our capacity to feel compassion for others and even to care for our enemies. We don't have to like them, just recognize their universal feelings and needs misdirected into harmful and unhealthy strategies to meet those needs. Access to compassion is crucial for just actions.
4. Act from love and care not hate and fear. Almost always, it is better to do nothing at all than to do something harmful. This isn't easy and people fail regularly. The key is to learn from every action and rededicate oneself to nonviolence and the growth of self awareness and compassion.
5. Respect your own limits and the limits of others. In a village in India, there was a nasty eight-foot long king cobra that liked to bite people. A guru went to see the snake and through her great power was able to calm the snake and persuade it not to bite people. Once the villagers saw the change in the snake's behavior, they started chasing it and beating it with sticks. The guru returned to see the snake and told him, "I persuaded you not to bite but I didn't tell you you couldn't hiss." Setting and respecting boundaries are a very important part of preventing violence in human relationships.
6. Sometimes force is necessary. When the man walked into the Knoxville church, fired three shots then started to reload his gun, five men immediately rose up, tackled and disarmed him, breaking his arm in the process. That defines for me the appropriate use of force, an extreme situation that requires force to prevent imminent danger of harm. And still all five men were very disturbed by their actions. They were disturbed to feel that violent energy coursing through their bodies. To act out of rage feeling the blood lust to kill

is very confusing to a peace lover. Like the Samurai who will not strike in anger, wise use of force requires enormous inner reserves of peace.

I feel deeply called to practice these six touchstones, to live nonviolently and spread nonviolence as a core principle of this congregation, while honoring the necessity of force in extreme situations. I recognize it as the core teaching of Jesus and the core teaching of the Buddha, two wise teachers who guide and inform my ministry. If you also feel so called, I invite you to stand with me now and publicly commit ourselves to this work.

Let us turn inward to hear and affirm these words:

Today, may we dedicate or rededicate ourselves to being peacemakers and following the path of nonviolence. May we deepen our awareness of the violence with us and our compassion for the common humanity we share. May we choose love and care as the source of our actions and may we respect our limits and the limits of others. And if we must use force, may it be in the service of life and the greater embracing love that holds us all.

So be it. Amen and blessed be.

Hymn #167 “Nothing But Peace is Enough”

Benediction

Every week we gather in this beautiful space to find peace.

Each week words and music offer and celebrate peace
with the hope of instilling it in us.

Now, take the peace you have found here,
back out into the world with you.

Renewed in our faith and inspired to act,
Let us be the peacemakers the world aches for;
And, by being peacemakers,
let us find the peace we long for.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

References

Biographies of well known Unitarians and Universalists can be found at the UU Historical Society web site: <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/index.html>

Adin Ballou has his own web site: <Http://www.adinballou.org>

Full text of Holmes New Wars for Old can be found on <http://books.google.com>

The Peacemaking Statement of Conscience can be found at:

<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/peacemaking/121606.shtml>

More on Just Peacemaking can be found at:

http://www.peacecoalition.org/facts/PDF/just_peacemaking.pdf and

<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0501&article=050111a>