

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Mothers for Peace”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 11, 2008

Spoken Meditation

“The Message of Peace” by Julia Ward Howe

Bid the din of battle cease!
Folded be the wings of fire!
Let your courage conquer peace,
Every gentle heart's desire

Let the crimson flood retreat!
Blended in the arc of love,
Let the flags of nations meet,
Bind the raven, loose the dove.

At the altar that we raise
King and Kaiser may bow down;
Warrior-knights above their bays
Wear the sacred olive crown.

Blinding passion is subdued.
Men discern their common birth,
God hath made of kindred blood
All the peoples of the earth.

High and holy are the gifts
He lavished on the race, --
Hope that quickens, prayer that lifts,
Honor's meed, and beauty's grace.

As in Heaven's bright face we look
Let our kindling souls expand;
Let us pledge, on nature's book;
Heart to heart and hand to hand.

For the glory that we saw
In the battle-flag unfurled,

Let us read Christ's better law:
Fellowship for all the world!

Sermon

Julia wrote in her autobiography, reflecting on the Franco-Prussian war and the continual defeats of the French armies (which she laid at German opportunism):

As I was revolving these matters in my mind, while the war was still in progress, I was visited by a sudden feeling of the cruel and unnecessary character of the contest. It seemed to me a return to barbarism, the issue having been one which might easily have been settled without bloodshed. The question forced itself upon me, "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?" I had never thought of this before. The august dignity of motherhood and its terrible responsibilities now appeared to me in a new aspect, and I could think of no better way of expressing my sense of these than that of sending forth an appeal to womanhood throughout the world, which I then and there composed...

The little document which I drew up in the heat of my enthusiasm [which we just read responsively] implored women, all the world over, to awake to the knowledge of the sacred right vested in them as mothers to protect the human life which costs them so many pangs. I did not doubt but that my appeal would find a ready response in the hearts of great numbers of women throughout the limits of civilization. (Autobiography page 327-8)

Such were the beginnings of a Mother's Peace Day that began being celebrated on June 2nd. Of course Julia Ward Howe is probably best known for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" that became an anthem for the American Civil War and established Howe's fame and fortune as an author and activist.

Mother of six children herself, she had a deeply religious and philosophical spirit and a great passion for social justice. She used her reputation to help lead the struggle for abolition, women's rights and world peace.

Her ideas were far ahead of the times in which she lived. And she knew it. She also wrote in her autobiography about her peace work:

I was very sorry to give up this special work, but in my prosecution of it I could not help seeing that many steps were to be taken before one could hope to effect any efficient combination among women. The time for this was at hand, but had not yet arrived. (Autobiography page 336)

My question for you today is, has the time arrived *even now*?

This has been on my mind as I've watched the events unfolding in Iraq. General Petraeus seems to be having some success over there, temporarily cooling the fervor to get us out of Iraq. I've listened to a lot of analysis in the popular press arguing he understands counterinsurgency and how to get people to unload their guns and start talking and negotiating. I don't doubt that some of his commanders in the field are doing some really good work to begin to restore order and end violence.

I opposed the war, demonstrated in New York City against it and felt a deep sense of despair as the worldwide protest against it was completely ignored by President Bush. That despair only deepened as the peace was lost practically from the first day with the looting of Baghdad, except of course for the oil ministries.

I've taken a modified General Colin Powell approach to dealing with Iraq, "You broke it, you fix it." Bush got us into this mess, he needs to get us out. But now I see that he doesn't want to get us out. He wants us to stay. He has built military bases there and wants to occupy the strategic Iraqi real estate for a long time to come. Bush isn't really interested in peace. He wants to continue to fight a worldwide war on terror.

I've been reading the wise words and testimony before congress of Retired General William E. Odom. He has worked at the highest levels of government as director of the National Security Agency and the Army's senior intelligence officer under Reagan and a military assistant on national security under Carter. He sees the only way for peace in Iraq is to remove our troops and engage the international community in taking responsibility for a security solution. This can't happen with our troops dominating the military theater.

Unfortunately the Bush/Cheney approach divides the world up into the good guys, the bad guys and the really bad axis of evil guys. If you see your opponents as sub-human scum that are better eliminated than bargained with then a worldwide containment program does actually make sense. But this presupposes a dualistic theology of God's saints in a holy war with the devil's demons – a mirror of the Islamic jihadist fundamentalists who see themselves as righteous warriors against the great Satan.

Unitarian Universalists don't think this way – we can't – if we want to embrace the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our first principle is rooted in both Unitarianism and Universalism. The early Universalists read the Bible for themselves and interpreted the Jesus' atonement of humanity as completely inclusive, cleansing any stain that might make us unredeemable. The Early Unitarians looked to scientific, literary and intellectual progress and in humanity saw a capacity to recognize truth that elevated us and testified to our inherent value. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists rejected the Calvinist doctrine of election that decided our destiny for good or bad before we were born.

Today we understand inherent worth and dignity as a valuing of all human life. Each person has a birthright human capacity for good. This doesn't mean every person will be good. Each person's capacity for good is not automatic, but rather a potential capacity for good. That potential develops to its fruition through our personal growth and spiritual development. That intentional and fortuitous (what some might call grace) development can be thought of as an evolution of consciousness. Our religious task is to develop that capacity for good, to evolve our consciousness and thus to realize our inherent worth and dignity.

I see this concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every person as an evolutionary social adaptation with wonderful potential for society. Unfortunately it is in its early stages of development. It doesn't have wide support yet in this country. Many people today prefer a dualistic theology that separates the good guys (usually 'us') from the bad guys (usually 'them') and objectifies the other as an enemy. Dualistic theology may also have evolutionary roots. Evolution has also hardwired anger and hate into our DNA. These primitive emotional responses can only be tamed through the evolution of consciousness. For our species to survive and thrive, we must strongly affirm and promote evolutionary social adaptations compatible with appreciating the worth and dignity of the other.

Peacemaking has this adaptation as a core principle. There must be recognition and appreciation of worth and dignity in others to make peace with them. Without seeing others as having worth and dignity, there can be no lasting peace, only a pause in an ongoing conflict.

At the 2006 General Assembly, the delegates decided to make "peacemaking" a congregational study/action issue. I'm a little late bringing this to your attention after two years, but I have a growing sense of the importance of peacemaking as a Unitarian Universalist religious principle. It has taken me some time to clear out of my head the empty headed approach to peace exemplified by the hippies during the 1960's. This

peace approach too often was just about avoiding the draft to fight in Vietnam rather than a principled, religious approach to non-violence.

The study action issue asks this question: "...should the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war...and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means." The question of whether all kinds of violence can be eliminated is much less interesting to me (and impossibly theoretical to ever resolve) than exploring how much nonviolence can we use to solve our problems?

- What can we learn about peaceful methods of conflict resolution?
- What effective nonviolent techniques encourage social change?
- How much nonviolence can we practice in our families?
- What kind of self-development and spiritual discipline supports inner and outer peace?

After all, if we cannot practice nonviolence here in our congregation, in our personal lives and in our families then how can we think we can eliminate violence and war? Right here, right now, we can do the research to discover if peace is possible. We can evolve our consciousness to the level we can sustain a peaceful life in and around us? This is profoundly religious work and what better place to do it than in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

I've been thinking about the symbol of the Unitarian church in Transylvania, a dove surrounded by a snake holding its tail in a circle. This symbol was inspired by Jesus' commission of his disciples, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."

Jesus can be a great inspiration to us on the subject of peacemaking because he didn't equate peacemaking with being a doormat. The work of peacemaking can be as fierce and crafty as it is friendly and compassionate. The key to being a peacemaker is at all times honoring the worth, dignity and integrity of those with whom we are in conflict. Peacemaking requires mercy and purity of heart. Developing that capacity requires recognition of what Jesus knew directly. We are part of a greater realm of existence that unites us all together. This realm we may not be able to recognize with our senses, only through our religious sense Emerson called Intuition or some call the divine or the holy. Others may witness it in the amazingly complex interconnected systems and cycles in the natural world that support and uphold life.

Peacemaking is deeply religious work. We Unitarian Universalists are well positioned to do it in a way that brings people together rather than divides them. With world tensions rising with oil and food prices, we need nonviolent ways to resolve our conflicts more than ever.

As we begin developing a new vision for our congregation, I'm wondering if peacemaking may be one vision that could guide us forward. Whether being nonviolent with the biosphere or our neighbors, I'd like to begin exploring peacemaking this fall to see if it fits us as the right direction for our congregation as a way to be a force for good in our community and a path of inner development for our members. The only way to live sustainably on this planet is by learning to live in peace with our neighbors as wars are incredibly ecologically destructive. The only way to limit pollution, manage fresh water resources, and preserve farmland and natural resources is through global cooperation.

And toward that end, let us today return to Julia Ward Howe's vision of Mother's Day as a day of peace. Let us honor our foremothers who struggled valiantly to make this world a more peaceful place. And like Howe, let us pay attention to the sudden feelings that grab us and drive us toward working for peace ... and bring them to life.

Benediction

As we leave this place, may we heed Dorothy Thompson's wise words:

"Peace has to be created, in order to be maintained. It is the product of Faith, Strength, Energy, Will, Sympathy, Justice, Imagination, and the triumph of principle. It will never be achieved by passivity and quietism."

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

References:

Books by Julia Ward Howe:

[Later Lyrics](#)

Boston: J. E. Tilton & company, 1866.

[At Sunset](#)

Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910.

[Reminiscences](#), 1819 - 1899.

Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900.

Web site: <http://www.juliawardhowe.org/index.htm>

[What's Wrong With Cutting and Running?](#) by General William E. Odom

<http://www.antiwar.com/orig/odom.php?articleid=7487>

UUA Peacemaking site to explore:

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