

Peacemaking

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On Tuesday, I came across a photograph that I had never seen before. Dennis Greene and Chris Laudon, our Property Co-chairs were meeting in the Channing Library. As we discussed this church as a property of national significance in preparation for a restoration grant proposal, I pulled the Channing Centennial volume off the shelf. In that book are some remarkable accounts of the ways William Ellery Channing's life and ministry was celebrated in Europe, Boston, and here in Newport.

However, what fell out of the front flap was a newspaper clipping dated 1915. The yellowed newsprint features an image captioned, "Interior of the Old Unitarian Church, Mill Street". As many of you know, before this sanctuary was built, our congregation founded in 1835, met in the Old Hopkins Meeting House one block over on Mill Street. I've often wondered what the old church looked like before this gilded age sanctuary was built.

Well, the clipping revealed a white sanctuary with box pews, a raised chancel, three of the chairs you see before you today, and a central pulpit. Why am I telling you this? Surely, only the minister and history buffs would be interested in the details of our former church building! The reason that I wanted to tell you about this discovery was part of the photograph took me altogether by surprise! Bold block letters on the proscenium archway over the pulpit clearly read "FOR CHRIST AND PEACE" with the dates of the Newport Unitarian church on either side.

What is the significance of our religious community being founded "For Christ and Peace"? What if we were to emblazon these words in our sanctuary today?

First of all, "FOR CHRIST" no longer fits in a religious community made up of Pagans, Jews, Atheists, Buddhists, and even Christians who enjoy being part of a church that is open to many sources of wisdom and inspiration. Our spiritual ancestors believed in the importance of individual conscience and a personal relationship with the sacred that has led Unitarian Universalists today to be religiously pluralistic.

So, what is our stand on Peace? This is a very good question and one worth exploring further. As I mentioned in December, our Association has selected "Peacemaking" as the Congregational Study Action Issue for 2006-2010. This means delegates from member congregations adopted "Peacemaking" at our General Assembly as a subject worthy of study, dialogue, and action.

What would it mean for us as a church to once again proclaim that we are "FOR PEACE"? What is the Unitarian Universalist view of Peacemaking? There are some who feel that non-violence should be added as an Eighth Principle of our Association.

There are others who remind us that historically we have not been a pacifist movement. Unitarian Universalists serve with honor in the military and you may be interested to know that former Secretaries of Defense, William Perry and William Cohen were also UU. When the Iraq War broke out we were very aware of the wide range of perspectives among our members. In fact, our strongly held opinions about just war and pacifism is what led to the creation of Hot Topics, a forum in which our members are encouraged to consider and discuss divergent points of view about controversial issues.

War, conflict, violence, hostility, and growing tension over depleted resources, make peace an important issue of our times. Of course, peace is not the absence of conflict it is how we respond when conflict arises. In order for us both individually and collectively to promote peaceful coexistence and eliminate abuse in civic, congregational, family, and personal life, thoughtful attention and intentional action is required.

As a minister I am often called upon to be a Peacemaker. This is one reason that I chose this vocation. I feel called to bring more love and understanding into the world whether through counseling, teaching, preaching, or the work of social justice. One of the primary roles of a minister is that of Peacemaker, helping to heal broken relationships. This is most obvious when couples seek out a pastoral counselor, but it also occurs whenever an individual shares pain over a damaged relationship and that can be any number of configurations—between parents and children, boss and employee, friends, siblings, or even between fellow church members. Whenever people seek out counsel, it is a good sign that some degree of greater peace will be found. When we take time to focus our attention on the hurt or conflict, it is far more likely that a path toward some sort of reconciliation or healing will emerge.

Over the years, I have married many people—or as my husband Peter reminds me, I have officiated many wedding ceremonies personally I have only married him. Ah, weddings, when two people commit themselves to love, honor and cherish one another until the end of time; when family members and friends come together to witness two people committing themselves in love. A day set aside to celebrate the love the couple has found in one another and all the promise of their new life together.

At least, that is what a marriage ceremony is supposed to be about. Unfortunately, I have found that weddings are often times wrought with tension and conflict. So much so that some of my colleagues have told me that they would much rather officiate at a funeral than at a wedding. One friend told me that he would rather honor the dead when everyone is on their best behavior than conduct a wedding when old conflicts surface and power struggles emerge.

I have not given up conducting weddings, but I have had moments when Peace on Earth seemed a distant dream. For example, during a wedding rehearsal when the mother of the bride stormed out exclaiming she would fly home that day and threatened to miss the ceremony all together. Another time at the reception at a nearby mansion the father of the bride confessed to me that he would be in debt for years but by God, he showed the other family how classy he was! There was the time the groom refused to kiss the bride

during the rehearsal. For me the cuteness of children in weddings is overshadowed by what can be an ugly contest of wills between the ring bearer and his father. How is it that a day dedicated to holy vows of love and commitment can bring about such hostility?

This is actually the second service in a series on Peace that was postponed because of a snowstorm. The first service back in December focused on “Finding Inner Peace”. I shared the self-discrepancy theory by psychologist E. Tory Higgins to explain why we so often experience inner turmoil. Each one of us carries three self-images: the actual, the ideal, and the ought. The actual self is who we are right now, the ideal self is who we wish to be, and the ought self is who others or society tells us we should be. When there is a discrepancy between the actual and the ideal or the actual and the ought, negative emotions are stirred up within us.

In light of the self-discrepancy theory, it is no wonder that weddings are times ripe for conflict. Each wedding participant holds different ideas about the ideal wedding and puts a different emphasis on what others expect of them. It is no wonder that many engaged couples cannot bear this tension. I know any number of fiancés who broke it off just as the invitations were about to be sent. I also know mothers and daughters who were close until wedding planning drove them apart.

As I mentioned, one of my roles is as a Peacemaker. During the wedding rehearsal when the mother of the bride ran out exclaiming that she would fly home that day, I ran after her. Her rage led her to say any number of nasty things about her daughter and future son-in-law. As it turns out, the real source of her anger was the fact that the step-mother (her ex-husband’s second wife) had been given a reading in the service and she felt left out of her daughter’s special day. The ceremony had brought to the surface her feelings of despair over her failed first marriage, doubts about her relationship with her daughter and whether she was valued as a mother.

After my listening with compassion, she calmed down significantly. I explained that she could not change the wedding ceremony, the selections had been made and the programs were printed. However what she could change was her part in her daughter’s life story. At that moment, she had the power to choose what role she was going to play. She could fly home and essentially strike because of what she believed was unfair treatment or she could make a commitment that day to love, honor, and cherish her daughter and support this marriage that would move forward with or without her presence. She left the wedding rehearsal with no promise to return.

The following day, as people gathered for the ceremony, there was no sign of the mother of the bride and no word from her since the previous evening. I found the bride in a back room surrounded by her bridesmaids. The bride was trying to put yesterday’s events behind her but her mother’s anger was difficult to shake. I tried to reassure her that her promises to the groom were what mattered most. At that moment, her mother entered the room. Life is seldom like the movies. There was no huge apology. There was only a stiff embrace between mother and daughter. The mother said rather humbly, “I wanted to be here with you.”

What is the one weapon that will destroy your enemy? Compassion. Compassion is the realization that all people are just like you. When we focus only on our own desires and hurts, it cuts us off from recognizing our personal responsibility in one another's lives. Of course, a mother should attend her daughter's wedding. Ironically, it was her desire to have a closer relationship with her daughter that caused her to feel hurt and to behave so poorly. Her anger over the step-mother's role in the ceremony almost caused her to miss out on what she valued most deeply—being a participant in her daughter's life. It was the realization that love would grow only through her humility and caring presence that enabled her to rise above the feelings of hurt and to make peace.

As Chris Hedges writes, "To survive as a human being is possible only through love." The reading this morning is the conclusion of a book titled "War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning". The author was a foreign correspondent for fifteen years often reporting on the front lines of war and conflict. This was work that he enjoyed. Hedges found that he felt most alive when facing death. The premise of his bestselling book is that war is a force that gives us meaning because it draws people together. In the trenches, against a common enemy, people find a greater sense of purpose and also intimacy, breaking through the usual divisions that keep people isolated. Hedges argues that for this reason war, violence, and hostility provides an emotional rush that can be addictive. In the end it is only Love that gives us a meaning that endures.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on Christmas Day in 1942, "There is a very real danger of our drifting into an attitude of contempt for humanity." Even as the German Lutheran pastor was held in a concentration camp, Bonhoeffer upheld the importance of being a peacemaker, writing, "We must learn to regard people less in light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer." Once again, the message is of compassion- to suffer with, to resist judging people by their actions, but to remember at all times our common humanity.

The reason for conflict during wedding ceremonies is similar to the reasons for Holy War. Through out history and in our own times religion has often sparked conflict. Violence erupts especially when the two parties hold visions of the ideal world that clash. This is especially true in the most fundamentalist views of any religion that claims to have the one true way. The conflict in the Holy Land is especially heartbreaking considering how much the different parties treasure those sacred sites and hold spiritual ancestors in common. This morning we included passages from Christian and Muslim scriptures in our service to uphold a common vision of peace found in both religious traditions.

Christians regard Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace. He taught an unconventional way of living in which all people are called to "Love their enemies" and "to turn the other cheek". His birth was heralded as the beginning of Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All.

The Prophet Mohammed who is considered the last messenger and prophet of God by Muslims brought a message meant to transform society and to establish moral

order. In the Qur'an, Jews, Christians and Muslims are referred to as "People of the Book". Jesus is mentioned as one of a succession of highly revered prophets including Abraham and Moses. The Qur'an offers a message of hope, faith and peace. The Muslim Scripture provides a guide to living a path of peace. Peace is found through faith in God and the creation of a just society.

As a liberal religious faith, inclusion and dialogue are foremost in our worldview. I continually ask myself:

Do I have religion enough to realize:

- Every person is just like me.
- Every day is an opportunity to commit in love.
- Every place is a Holy Land.

Compassion must be our practice. Each one of us is called to be a peacemaker, to bring greater love and understanding into the world. Following the service, there will be a discussion in Channing House about Peacemaking. I hope that you will join in the conversation about how we as individuals and as a congregation could "Build a Culture of Peace". Our small group ministry program will also be exploring Peacemaking in greater depth this semester. Sign-up sheets for small groups are found in your order of service.

I invite you to join me, to join us, to join our Association and the world in engaging with these issues. As much as we would wish it, peace is not something that happens in a flash. Peace requires each one of us to be mindful of our place in the interdependent web of life and to take responsibility for our actions, always seeking greater understanding.

It is the illusion of our separateness that makes us most angry and afraid. We must have religion enough to realize:

- Every person is just like us.
- Every day is an opportunity to commit in love.
- Every place is a Holy Land.