

Sunday, September 21, 2008

International Day of Peace Service

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

“When we recognize the violence that has taken root within us, in the everyday way we think, speak, and act, we can wake up and live in a new way. We can make a strong determination to live mindfully, to live in peace. Shining the light of awareness on the roots of violence within our own hearts and thoughts, we can stop the war where it begins, in our minds. Stopping the war in our minds and in our hearts, we will surely know how to stop the war outside.”

-Thich Nhat Han, *Creating True Peace*

“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.”

-Watty Piper, *The Little Engine that Could*

Opening Words

In the name of the day break, Diana Ackerman

In the name of the daybreak
and the eyelids of morning
and the wayfaring moon
and the night when it departs,

I swear I will not dishonor
my soul with hatred,
but offer myself humbly
as a guardian of nature,
as a healer of misery,
as a messenger of wonder,
as an architect of peace. . .

I will honor all life --
wherever and in whatever form
it may dwell -- on Earth my home,
and in the mansions of the stars.

Reflection, “Choosing Peace”

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Tomorrow is the Autumn equinox, when the season of sowing and growing yields to a time of tilling the fields under and waiting for the months of decay to produce fertile ground again. For me, fall is a contemplative time, when I till into the inner soil of my

being my worries, confusion – even despair and anguish – so that they might settle, compost, and emerge again transformed into new wisdom or creativity.

This year I enter my season of contemplation feeling troubled. For me, choosing peace, on this International Day of Peace, will mean tilling some difficult questions and feelings into my inner soil, where they can settle into the deep for a while.

Let me travel back a couple of months, to July 27, a sticky Sunday at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. There, shortly after the service began, a gunman entered the sanctuary and began firing. Before parishioners wrestled Jim Adkisson to the ground, he had killed two and seriously wounded 6 others.

Adkisson's action stunned religious and non-religious people alike. Many UU churches, including this one, held vigils of support. In the aftermath of the shooting, the UUs of Knoxville were bathed in love and compassion.

But a haunting question lingered: Why?

A police statement linked Adkisson's crime to his frustration over being unemployed and "his hatred for the liberal movement." Adkisson reportedly said, "all liberals should be killed because they are ruining the country."ⁱ A long letter Adkisson left in his truck revealed his hatred of liberals and gays. The police search also turned up a book called *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*, by right-wing talk radio host, Michael Savage. Thus a line was drawn between the prolific hate-speech of ultra right-wing radio so-called "shock jocks" and Adkisson's hate crime.

Now, much evidence indicates Adkisson was in terrible distress, pushed over the edge by one blow after another in a ne'er-do-well life. As I said in my September newsletter column, I doubt Adkisson is the first phalanx in an armed battle against liberal religion. I still doubt that. But there is no denying the word "liberal" and the concepts it represents are under venomous attack today.

This is a liberal religion – regardless of our individual politics, which come in all flavors. So, for me, attacks on liberalism enter the realm of the personal.

Chris Buice, UU minister in Knoxville, says, "What we mean by the word *liberal* transcends partisan politics or even religious ideology. Liberalism is about a generosity of the spirit. This liberalism of the spirit speaks to all those who would like to live a life of open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands."ⁱⁱ

To attack liberal religious values means to attack generosity, open-mindedness, love, and compassion.

Even more disturbing, hate-speech does not simply tear down particular positions, it dehumanizes the people holding those positions. A recent Bill Moyers “Journal” program recounted the events in Knoxville, underlined the power of hate speech, and drew a disturbing parallel between the hate-filled radio broadcasts in this country and similar broadcasts in Rwanda. There, in 1994, Hutu radio announcers engaged in hate speech that dehumanized the Tutsi people. Words led to deeds that ultimately left countless Tutsis dead.

As autumn arrives, I would like to hurl hate speech onto the compost pile, where it can decay and make way for something new, life-affirming, and fruitful. Instead, my own unease, anger, and fear go into the soil.

And this question: How can I choose peace in light of hatred?

On his show, even as Moyers decried hate language, he defended the right to free speech. And I, too, defend that right.

Moyers concluded his broadcast with the same story I told the children earlier, a particular favorite of mine. That story reflects my experience of myself – the wolves that live inside me – and it teaches me about my own ability to make choices.

The first step to peace is recognizing that both the violent wolf and the peaceful wolf coexist inside.

The second step is choosing. I can choose peace.

History is replete with examples of how answering hatred with more hatred, violence with more violence, only begets more hatred and violence. Radio “shock jocks” themselves provide evidence of this: With each new shocking statement, they escalate the level of outrage they project, and little by little they destroy norms of decency. Both radio announcer and listener become increasingly trained to hatred and violence.

But, answering violence with *non-violence* can stop the cycle, de-escalate the level of outrage, and little-by-little restore the norms of decency. Stopping violence and hatred means actively choosing peace.

People far wiser than I have chosen peace, even in the face of violence. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn is one such wise person, who can be a guide. He was born in Vietnam in 1926.^{liii} His Buddhist faith was tested by a war that tore his country apart. Through his writing, teaching, and activism, he has devoted his life to cultivating peace.

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Buddhism, you may recall, hinges on the observation that suffering comes to all. Suffering, untended, begets more suffering – in the form of hatred or anger or violence. There are no bad people, you might say; there are only suffering people.

Buddhism aims to alleviate that suffering in ways too complex to address fairly in this short time. I will save the four noble truths and the eight-fold path for another day. But I want to mention some general points.

For Thich Nhat Hahn, the spiritual work of embracing peace means first developing a nonjudgmental, compassionate inward gaze – a mindfulness that accepts whatever dwells within, even the messy, awkward, and uncomfortable parts.

Compassion directed inwards heals.

“[The Buddha] encouraged us ... to look deeply into our suffering, and to take effective actions to transform it... No one is more worthy of your kindness and compassion than you are.” Thich Nhat Hahn says.^{iv}

Once we hold ourselves in compassionate regard, we can direct compassion outward, to the wider world.

Listen to this story from Thich Nhat Hahn’s experience. In 1946, a French soldier appeared at the monastery, demanding the entire meager supply of the monks’ rice. Thich Nhat Hahn was chosen to carry the bag of rice, at gunpoint, to the waiting vehicle. He felt himself fill with anger at the French soldier.

He writes: *“Many times over the years I have meditated on this French soldier. I have seen that, in his teens, he had to leave his parents, brothers, sisters, and friends to travel across the world to Vietnam, where he faced the horrors of killing my countrymen or being killed.*

I have often wondered whether the soldier survived and was able to return home to his parents... It is very likely that he did not survive...

After looking deeply, I came to realize that the Vietnamese were not the only victims of the war; the French soldiers were victims as well. With this insight, I no longer had any anger toward the young soldier. Compassion for him was born in me, and I only wished him well.”^v

By developing compassion for his own suffering, Thich Nhat Hahn opened the door to a larger understanding. He was able to see that violence affects everyone, even the perpetrators of violence.

“Shock jock” radio entertainers not only perpetrate hatred, they harvest it out of the core of their own suffering. Whatever personal suffering they have endured in their lives, they are also victims of a culture that fosters fear, prejudice, and isolation, that worships dollar power and fire power, that marginalizes those who do not measure up to the norm.

There are not bad people; there are people who suffer. Recognizing my own suffering, I cultivate inner compassion; recognizing the suffering of others, I cultivate compassion for the world around me.

I want to touch on one more concept –the power borne of relationship.

Relationship is critical: Choosing peace alone, I thwart my ability to make much difference. To truly change the course of things will require the power of many who have chosen peace, to join together.

Thich Nhat Hahn says, “If we are a drop of water and we try to get to the ocean as only an individual drop, we will surely evaporate along the way. To arrive at the ocean, you must go as a river.”^{vi}

I am one drop of water. I would like to join a mighty river. A river that flows to Knoxville and also into the shock jocks’ recording booths. A river that flows into the offices of heads of state and into the barracks of soldiers. A river that soothes suffering, a river that bathes our world anew.

Because that’s what true change will require. It will require many, and many more, to choose differently, to choose the ways of inner and outer compassion, and to join together like a mighty river, bringing water to our thirsty world.

Reflection, “My Journey to Peace”

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Peace, Salaam, Shalom. In all languages, Peace.

Good morning. I am honored to be speaking to you today on this International Day of Peace.

In thinking about where to begin in sharing my journey to peace, it became clear to me that right now/the present is the perfect place. With all of you in this church community, on this International Day of Peace, I find a community of belonging and inclusivity, so unlike the church of my youth that taught about evil, sin and a vengeful God. Today I officially become a member of this church. Doing this today is symbolic for me as I have committed my life to working for peace.

A couple years ago, Cathey Cyrus gave me a copy of *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh. She has become a mentor for me. It was in reading this book and being in relationship with Cathey that I began to understand and then embrace what being peace really means (for me).

I began attending the Peacemaking Group meetings this summer and have enjoyed meeting everyone in that group.

My understanding is that there is a UU peacemaking congregational study action program for 2006-2010 looking to clarify, as a religious denomination, the position and apply our covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Unitarian Universalist religious principles call us to strive for a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Unitarian Universalism has a long history of working for peace.

Thich Nhat Hanh says: “We are not capable of being alive in the present moment. We tend to postpone being alive to the future, the distant future, we don't know when. Now is not the moment to be alive. We may never be alive at all in our entire life. Therefore, the technique, if we have to speak of a technique, is to BE in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and the only moment to be alive is the present moment.”

I'm using the definition of Peace as defined by inner peace; harmony and balance within one's being.

Inward peacemaking: to create deeper peace within ourselves; in building inner harmony, self-acceptance and compassionate understanding of our own needs and feelings. This will bring forth deeper peace in our relationships with others... our family, friends and on out into the world.

My journey to peace goes back many years.

In the early '90s I became involved with a program called the Earthstewards Network. The Earthstewards Network's Vision includes this phrase: “Earthstewards are people everywhere, connected by a network of communication and consciousness, who know the power of their thoughts and actions and are directing them in the service of their brothers and sisters and of their planet.” In the mid 90s I took the new trainings developed by ESN called Essential Peacemaking Women & Men. The intention in this program is an invitation to make a positive difference participating in the everyday peacemaking that is fundamental to our planet – the communication between women and men. At the heart of this program is the philosophy that ordinary people have the caring and capability to gather small groups together, to share with each other in deep and meaningful ways, freeing us to become powerful partners in global leadership. My partner Dan and I participated in these trainings together and began facilitating the one-day workshop – offering the experience to others to learn and practice right relationship.

Following the 2004 presidential election, I fell into a deep state of despair as I was not happy with the outcome of this election. Perhaps some of you were not happy with that outcome either. For several months, I found no energy to engage in any activities other than my regular routine of work and home. Soon, however, a longing in my soul... a spiritual calling...began to permeate my daily thoughts.

Finally, on a February day just after my 50th birthday, I heard a strong message in my heart: "It's about Peace. Your life is to be committed to bringing about peace. Start with yourself." Beginning that day, I made the commitment to practice being at peace in all that I do.

Then later in the Spring, I read an article from Dennis Kucinich, talking about the campaign for a cabinet level Department of Peace. The more I read, the stronger the passion grew within me. In her book, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life*, Dawna Markova defines passion as "the natural life energy that exists inside each of us, urging growth; a deep and natural pulse that tells us to live from the inside out."

I knew I had to get involved! I had been struggling for so long to find a place for my energy, an outlet that wasn't aimed AGAINST something, but FOR something.

In 2005, I attended The Peace Alliance, Department of Peace national conference where I met others from Maine. The Department of Peace is working to establish a U.S. Department of Peace & Nonviolence in our government to reduce and prevent violence in the U.S and abroad. The department will increase our ability to strategically develop and apply practical, cost effective and proven means of resolving conflict. The campaign also embraces the belief of creating a culture of peace. This especially resonates with me.

Together with the work of the Dept of Peace and Creating a Culture of Peace, I began a daily practice. The decision is easy; the practice can be challenging and requires steady focus and practice, practice, practice.

After a few years of working with the Dept of Peace, I was given a book written by John & Ty Webster *Reverence for ALL Life* based on the teachings of Dr. Albert Schweizer. I had already become a vegan when I first got involved with the campaign, thinking how could I begin the practice of nonviolence and not carry it forward toward all living creatures? Reverence for life, according to Dr Albert Schweizer, is one of the most important messages in the history of language. I agree. Reverence for life is a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love and awe for every living being. It is an active feeling. And requires action in its application.

In July 2007, I took a two-week trip, driving to Minnesota to attend a Department of Peace Forward (retreat). It was a glorious experience of which one highlight is as follows: I went into the Dayton Ohio International Peace Museum. It was a magical place. As I stood at the counter talking with the director I realized that I needed to marry peace. I had seen a ring with the peace symbol we all recognize today (from the 60s representing nuclear disarmament) with a Celtic knot on either side. I asked Steve, the director, to witness this marriage, and so my commitment was sealed.

I have recently learned of something called POSITIVE PEACE, which is defined as: Increasing fulfillment through cooperation, harmony and fusion, peace building, development, structural peace, cultural peace and spirituality by JOHAN GALTUNG, Oslo Norway.

We are in the International Decade for a Culture of Peace (2001-2010) and their program of action says: "We envision a world in which a positive peace prevails."

I like to use the example of a small boat crossing a river. Often the boats are caught in rough seas, people may panic, boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. The world needs people who can sit still and be able to smile, who can walk peacefully. It is this I believe that will bring us all to peace.

I facilitate a Peace Circle where the Intention is “practicing” being peace; learning to be peace. If two people engage with focus and feeling, the effect multiplies. A single candle in the darkness dispels the night. The quality and effectiveness of our intention is greatly enhanced by envisioning peace in our mind, choosing peace with all our heart, and in being peace in our lives.

Pema Chodron, in *Practicing Peace in Times of War*, writes, “...whatever we do today, tomorrow, and every day of our lives until we die sows the seeds for our own future in this lifetime and sows the seeds for the future of this planet.” The Buddhist teachings also say that the seeds of our present day actions will bear fruit hundreds of years from now.

So, which wolf do we feed?

I end with my favorite quote from Danaan Parry, co-founder of the Earthstewards Network:

I say Yes to my life
I say Yes to love
I say Yes to a one world family
I say Yes to a planet at peace
I say Yes to all children everywhere
I say Yes to us
I want my next act to increase the Yes in the world

I am deeply grateful for each of you and the new community I am now a member of. And so it is.

ⁱ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ3ap-BK0e0>

ⁱⁱ Is It OK to Hate a Liberal (or Anyone Else)? Rev. Chris Buice.

<http://216.107.73.180/audioservices/iSermons/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/ourteacher.html>

^{iv} Thich Nhat Hanh, 2003. *Creating True Peace*. (New York: Free Press.) 41.

^v Thich Nhat Hanh, 2003. *Creating True Peace*. (New York: Free Press.) 3.

^{vi} Thich Nhat Hanh, 2003. *Creating True Peace*. (New York: Free Press.) 176.