

9 18 22—Peace in Our Time

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What is peace? How do we achieve it? As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we affirm and promote the 6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, so we must think that peace is important. Today, we dedicate our Peace Pole and re-commit to acts of peace-seeking. But what is peace and how do we achieve it?

A colleague once said to me that he thought peace activists were among the most passive aggressive people he knew. They would not throw a punch, but they would cut you to the quick with their words. As a person who grew up watching western shoot 'em ups and playing war and witnessing fistfights, I remain struck by that colleague's opinion. Violence takes many forms, not all of them obvious and not all of them direct. Some forms of violence are absences, a withholding rather than an act of aggression.

Against the normality of violence, I have dreamed a dream "of kindness and connection that softens and turns us toward each other with tenderness." Perhaps you have, too. I long every day for a reality where we are not hurting each other all across the scale—in our homes, and communities, and the whole large world. But though I don't throw punches or draw a weapon, inner peace hasn't followed my longing. Sweetness and light have not followed, despite meditation and reducing my intake of violent media.

Perhaps you already know this: the United States is a world leader among other wealthy nations for reported mental illness and death by suicide. A leader. What a dubious honor. Well, we might simply have a better data collection system than other countries. For sure we have something else that other wealthy countries don't have—a thin and inadequate social safety net. We know that a quarter of American adults report overwhelming anxiety, worry, addiction—these and other conditions harming themselves and their relationships. And we do not have a system that can address well and humanely our troubled minds. We treat such conditions, such heart-breaking realities as individual problems, as weaknesses and feebleness, as moral failures and delinquency. Yet, our country is also a leader in explosive income inequality, lack of affordable housing, lack of health care, lack of affordable and readily available nutritious food. Our country is riddled with systemic injustice—whole genders and classes and colors of people cut off from rights and equity by systems favoring business growth and profits over human and humane considerations. No punches were thrown, no guns drawn. But this is not peace.

Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us "When you look deeply into your anger, you will see that the person you call your enemy is also suffering. As soon as you see that, the capacity of accepting and having compassion for them is there." If anger is a form of violence and also a sign of suffering, then it is very wise indeed to recognize the violence and the suffering mutually, to see it both in ourselves and in each other. If we have cultivated compassion for ourselves, we can in turn cultivate compassion for others who are so like ourselves. Rather than be carried off by waves of worry, we might instead start to notice the here and now. Spend more time with ourselves, knowing our deep loves and longings, connecting with other selves and with nature, connecting with the wonder that is the true reality and mystery of living. The love and light inside each of us sustains us and can be shared with others. Peace in

oneself is to offer peace to all others, in this our time. Such practice is so important, so important for taking good care of our one precious life.

And such practice is not enough, for we live in the world, and the world is full of woe, and because of our total interdependence, that woe is within us, too. We are not angry, anxious, and ill because we have not meditated sufficiently on our ourselves. We are angry, anxious, and ill because our interdependence is not sufficiently recognized. We are impacted by the harm and oppression and injustice that is perpetrated upon some of us more directly than others but impacting all of us, nonetheless. Unless we see that we internalize the pain of the world, we have little incentive to try to change what must be changed. Peace does not exist on its own, in the desire expressed by our 6th Principle nor in reality. Peace goes hand in hand with liberty and justice for all, everywhere.

As we wonder about the nature of peace and impact of violence upon us all, here are just two stories from this weekend: The governor of the State of Florida, using state funds budgeted for this express purpose, chartered airplanes and flew migrants from Venezuela from Texas to Martha's Vineyard to demonstrate political opposition to current immigration policy. We do not yet know the legal status of the people caught up in a political fight, what their claims for asylum might look like. But we do know that they are fleeing war and economic devastation. We do know that they were lied to about where they were being flown to and what would await them there. We do know that they were treated as less-than-human, as pawns, as objects to be moved around by the powerful to make a point. No punches were thrown, no guns drawn. But this is not peace.

And another story: In order to produce the electric cars that can replace the highly polluting and atmosphere-warming fossil fuel-driven engines, we are mining the ocean floor for rare earth minerals. This mining is devastating to ecosystems that we barely understand. We don't know that is on the ocean floor nor how the mining will affect the mining sites nor the rest of the planet. And, these mining sites are within the maritime limits of several economically-impooverished Pacific Island countries. As you might have already guessed, the compensation to a tiny nation like Nauru is a miniscule fraction of what the mining companies will make in profits. Classic exploitation. No punches were thrown, no guns drawn. But this is not peace.

We are imprisoned in our ways of thinking and doing, breaking the circles of connection that the sanctity of life calls us to keep whole—our inner connection, our connection with others, our connection with the earth, our connection with the generations behind and before us. We must seek peace within our own being, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches. And we are wise to remember the words of other great teachers. Here are Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Here are Nelson Mandela's words: "Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference." Here are Albert Einstein's words: "Peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, of law, of order—in short, of government." The last surely important as we elect leaders in the coming months, seeking a government that will turn increasing toward peace, freedom, and justice for all.

When the people from Venezuela de-planed on Martha's Vineyard, the de-humanization stopped for a moment. Churches, including our Unitarian Universalist church on the island, helped—with shelter, food, clothing, and kindness to restore some sense of their dignity. We do not know yet what act of resistance or government decree might insist that we put the good of the earth ahead of the greed of corporations. But we can have faith that peace begins within all of us. It begins as we bless our children with a token of our community, many small strands knotted together. We are only a community because of the numerous ways that we choose to be present together, with care and authenticity. We grow stronger when we have others there to support us, a dream of courage and commitment that will enable us to stay the course. Peace is not simply the absence of violence. We will keep moving, keep speaking, keep praying, keep singing until each of us, as examples to our children of truth and faith, until we achieve the peace that assures liberation, justice, and vital flourishing for all.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/desantis-to-spend-2412m-on-moving-migrants-whenever-they-are/ar-AA11UVoy>

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