

Peace on Earth¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading From *Jayber Crow* Wendell Berry²

[War] was caused, I thought, by people failing to love one another, failing to love their enemies. I was glad enough that I had not become a preacher, and so would not have to go through a war pretending that Jesus had not told us to love our enemies.

The thought of loving your enemies is opposite to war. You don't have to do it; you don't have to love one another. All you have to do is keep the thought in mind and [your own town] becomes visible, and you see its faces and know what it has to lose. Maybe you don't have to love your enemies. Maybe you just have to act like you do.

Sermon

The Unitarian Universalist Association has invited congregations to ask the question, "Is war ever justified in our time?" This is a very big question, and it brought up a host of other questions and issues for me. So today, I want to share with you some of my personal reflections on these questions—I don't have answers, but I want to warn you that the journey led me into some challenging terrain... so please forgive me if my words stir up uncomfortable feelings or thoughts. I hope that you might find something useful in my reflections, and I invite you to continue the conversation in our forum at 1:30 today.

First of all, I think most of us believe that war is horrible. It is human to recoil against aggression and violence, against killing other people, or an enemy hurting or killing ourselves or those we love. I certainly feel those things. And in this age of nuclear weapons, the devastation that might be unleashed is even more appalling. Out of that reaction to war, we might look for comfort in the concept of peace through non-violence—who doesn't want to stand against violence and war?

But when I actually began to study non-violence, as practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, among others, I learned that most of what I thought I knew about non-violence was a misconception. Non-violence does not mean the absence of violence, or even the practice of resisting violence. At its heart, non-violence is all about resistance to injustice.

It was a surprise to me when I learned that Gandhi himself thought that there were times when violence might be necessary. He said "Injustice must be resisted. No doubt the non-violent way is always the best, but where that does not come naturally the violent way is both necessary and honorable. Inaction here is rank cowardice and unmanly. It must be shunned at all costs."³ In another place, he wrote, "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and

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² From *Jayber Crow*, by Wendell Berry, p. 142.

³ *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi's Non-Violence in Peace and War*, Edited by Thomas Merton, (New Directions: 1964), p. 39.

violence, I would advise violence.”⁴ “The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating.”⁵

Intentional non-violent action is in fact quite likely to incite all sorts of violent reactions, because it challenges the established order. It challenges the power structure in favor of radical equality, and the equal dignity of all human beings, especially those who are in some way not treated as equal. When civil rights activists sat down at the lunch counters in the segregated south, they were stirring up trouble. And plenty of violence happened as a result of their actions—violence directed against them.

At its heart, non-violent action is dedicated to exposing hidden conflicts, hidden structures of injustice—non-violent action stirs up the hornets’ nest to create change.

It is very difficult to appreciate the scope of non-violent action when we are in a place of comfort in our lives. When we have good food, new clothing, beautiful homes, possessions, electronic gadgets, good work, friends and family, of course we want that comfort to endure. This is the good life. So we may be tempted to choose non-violence for all the wrong reasons. The idea of non-violence attaches itself to our desire to stay comfortable. We know that violence and war disrupt the good things of life. So we are drawn to finding different ways of resolving conflicts, ways that are gentler and less disruptive. But there is a problem with this perspective.

Living in America, there is a layer of injustice around us that is usually very well hidden. I read a story in the book *practicing peace*, which speaks to these hidden violences in our lives. The writer said: “When visiting Honduras, I noticed every place of affluence—nice homes, the bank, Wendy’s restaurant—had a guard with an M-16 standing outside. When I commented on this to a Honduran, he pointed out the United States does the same thing. We simply hide the weapons guarding our affluence in missile silos and nuclear submarines.”⁶

The United States, even in a recession, is the wealthiest nation on the planet. So, if we choose to advocate for the elimination of nuclear weapons, we must also ask ourselves, “Are we willing to share our wealth with those who have little?” And what might that mean for our understanding of immigration policy, for example? Will we stop the humiliation of those people who have come through our fences to try to claim even a few of the scraps from our tables? Are we willing to open the borders?

Gandhi’s method of non-violent action was not designed to keep the peace. It was designed to overcome oppression—to liberate the Indian people from the humiliation of British rule over their country. Gandhi stirred up trouble to reveal the violence inherent in the rule of force by one people over another. He stirred up trouble to reveal the violence inherent in the hoarding of wealth by some amidst the poverty of others.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi#cite_note-30#cite_note-30, referring to Bondurant, p. 28.

⁵ *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, p. 29.

⁶ Quoted from Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland, 2004, in *practicing peace*, edited by Catherine Whitmire, (Soren Books, 2007), p. 91.

So when we ask the question, “Is war ever justified?” we must be mindful that we are speaking here in the context of being citizens of an imperial power, the largest power on earth. Our country has its armies and its weapons strategically positioned all over the earth. Our country has used its forces to unseat democratically elected leaders, to put in power leaders that would do our government’s bidding, on behalf of what we call our economic interests in various regions all over the world. How would we feel if another country’s armies were stationed here in Portland?

According to most religious theories about the justice of war, it is never right to wage a war to assert dominance or conquest. If we look beneath the public rationale, the vast majority of U.S. military interventions in the last 50 years have been for the purpose of maintaining our economic priorities.⁷ So whether we follow the way of non-violent action, or follow the philosophy of justifiable war, we have to question those military choices.

I think we as Unitarian Universalists might make a powerful statement for peace and justice merely by challenging the government to curb its military power except for wars that fit classic just war definitions. In fact, that kind of statement might be more powerful than a statement of total renunciation of violence. What if we were to analyze and publish our moral assessment of each military intervention? What if we were to support conscientious objection to particular wars? I think we would find very few that we could in good conscience condone. Perhaps an intervention against genocide, called by an international coalition, might qualify.

When we are citizens of the largest power on earth, we also have to question our capacity and our right to judge the tactics of other peoples, when their battles are in a context of a struggle against injustice. For example, who are we to say that poor people in Palestine, who initiated the Intifada uprising, should have resisted humiliation only with non-violence? Who are we to say that a war to liberate people, to take back the control of land and resources from foreign occupation might not in good conscience be justified? Our government is likely to call that kind of war *terrorism*. It is easy to be taken in by the rhetoric of fear. But by our government’s definition, the early American revolutionaries themselves would have been called *terrorists*.

There was a shift that happened for me—a shift in how I thought about the questions. I stopped looking at situations merely in terms of violence, and I started looking at situations in terms of power. Historians talk about the *Pax Romana*—the peace of the Roman Empire, which lasted for about 200 years, beginning with the time of Caesar Augustus. When the Roman Empire had firmly established its dominance, there was this time of relatively lesser violence and warfare, because no one was able to withstand such a superpower.

But this *Pax Romana* did not go totally unchallenged. It was during the time of Caesar Augustus that another great teacher of non-violent action was born. His mother was a young Jewish girl who knew well the humiliation of the Roman occupation of Israel. Listen to the hopes expressed in the song Mary sang to her cousin Elizabeth:

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.⁸

⁷ For a more detailed look at the history of U.S. interventions since 1945 see: <http://www.killinghope.org/>

⁸ Luke 1:52-53.

Her son, Jesus, lived out the hopes expressed in her song. His radical message was to love your enemy—and his Jewish listeners knew very well the identity of their greatest enemy. So why did the Roman army kill him? Because to love your enemy is very different from fearing your enemy and submitting to your enemy. To choose to love your enemy can be to assert your own dignity and equality, your capacity to make a choice about your enemy—and that was unacceptable. Jesus was resisting the humiliation of the Jewish people under the Roman peace, and therefore he was disrupting the peace.

Gandhi and King were also killed in the living out of their non-violent action. People don't talk about it so much anymore, but King had become more and more critical of the U.S. government during his final years. He never let go of the principles of non-violence; he merely applied them to an expanding number of situations—particularly the Vietnam War. He began to question the moral justification for that war.

So even though I have a deep regard for non-violent action, I am a little frightened by its implications. I wonder if I really have the courage to resist imperialism and oppressions of all kinds. Do I have the courage to walk bravely right into the storm of hidden conflicts, to expose injustice, and suffer the consequences? How many times, while walking on the beach with my partner, have I let go of holding her hand, when we passed by a group of unknown men? Such a simple thing—and yet, through fear, I have put up with little humiliations.

How many of us try to avoid even relatively benign conflicts that exist in our interpersonal relations? How many of us try to please other people, or willingly give over our personal choices to avoid angering a boss or a controlling spouse? If we are so eager to avoid interpersonal conflict, how can we gather the courage for disrupting domination by non-violent action? So many of us are willing to quietly take our place in the system to avoid trouble.

This leads me into another question. It seems that underlying our propensity for violence is our propensity for hierarchy. Is it possible for human beings to move beyond dominance-seeking and coercive behaviors? Or are we hard-wired to seek power over other people, or to submit to other people, to establish our social order through domination?

Dominance is certainly a trait in our nearest primate relatives. A recent PBS show, called *Clever Monkeys*, videotaped monkeys committing murder, and engaging in violent battles against fellow members of their species. Their societies include rigid hierarchies. Often, animals are much less violent than human beings because they use substitutes for violence to assert dominance—once the pecking order is established, they don't have to fight that much.

So I wonder, if our instincts drive us to battle for hierarchy, can we evolve beyond that? Must we accept our instincts and just jump into the fray? Or is it possible to consciously move our species into a post-hierarchical world?

Looking at animal behavior clarified how non-violent action provokes violent responses. Non-violent action is a method for subverting the pecking order. Whenever we challenge the pecking order, we provoke a violent response which is directed toward keeping people in their place. So no wonder the election of Barack Obama triggered a backlash of racist incidents across the

country, including right here in Maine. No wonder my speaking out on behalf of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples triggered a hate call to our church. Someone saw me on television, and left a vulgar message on our answering machine about how despicable we were to support gay people.

So, for me, questions about peace on earth are not primarily about how we resolve conflicts—but about how we use our power and how we respond to power. And these questions apply to every scale of interaction—from the power of governments in the international arena, to the power of resisting oppression in our own society; from how we exercise leadership in our congregations to how we make decisions in intimate relationships.

I think we still need to wrestle with the question of if and when coercive power might be justified. For example, I do think there are times when parents must pick up their children and stop them from hitting each other, or running into the street. Parents have much more power than their children, and some of that coercive power seems beneficial. On the other hand, children are also great at resisting their parents' attempts to control them, and they instinctively know how to assert their own choices. Our hope in parenting is to keep our children safe, and empower them to become whole persons. Another hope is to give them tools to survive the harrowing challenge of bullying by school mates or the pecking order of popularity in high school.

The choice of non-violent action is a choice to engage one's own inner power, to resist being dominated by another, and also, to resist using one's power to dominate the other. It is an amazing thing to witness or to experience in action, even in small ways. As Unitarian Universalists, our values call us to a democracy of spirit—a belief in the deep-seated equality of all people underneath whatever status we may bear as determined by the hierarchical society. And so there is a natural resonance between our values and the principles underlying non-violent action.

Every time I have had the courage to take action against injustice, I have felt stronger and more whole. It has created an inner change in me, whether or not it was effective in changing the wider society. I believe that every time we are able to resist humiliation or curb our propensity for domination, we prove that a different future is possible. Every time we are able to take a stand on behalf of equality, we strengthen our human capacity for transformation.

These, to me, are the steps that might lead to peace on earth.

Closing Words

I come back to that challenging statement of Gandhi—
“The first principle of non-violent action
is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating.”⁹
What a concept to carry with us!
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

⁹ *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, p. 29.