

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The Day of Peacemaking

September 21, the day that since 1981 has been set aside by the United Nations for honoring the ideals of peace, this year happens to land calendar-wise on spiritually-hallowed ground.

Yesterday, Muslims in our own nation and across the globe marked the close of the holy month of Ramadan, during which they fasted, prayed, reflected on the past year, and renewed their relationship with Allah.

And at sundown one day before, our Jewish brothers and sisters began the observance of Rosh Hashanah, when it is said that God opens the Book of Life and seals the lives of God's people for another year. With the blowing of the shofar, Jews marked the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, during which they are called to reflect on their past deeds, make right for any wrongdoings, and return again to their faith.

So, it is a season infused with religious meaning—a season for many of reflection, repentance, and returning to faith.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith teaches us the value of learning about the practices of the world's religions. But I offer you a glimpse into Ramadan and Rosh Hashanah not just to pay spiritual homage to Islam and Judaism, the latter of which I and some of you are connected through birth or tradition.

Rather, I also bring them up because I think they are a fitting lens through which to view the International Day of Peace. Because while Peace Day is a secular celebration—commissioned by the council of nations—to honor and observe it is, in my mind, a holy act.

After all, the work of peacemaking is a sacred task.

And just as the high holidays of the ancient traditions call their practitioners back to the tenets of faith—the International Day of Peace calls all of us back to the ideals of peacemaking and our responsibility to make peace in our individual lives and to work for peace in our larger world.

*Blessed are the peacemakers, preached the radical rabbi, for they will be called children of God.*¹

¹ Matthew 5:9.

A few years ago, at our annual UU General Assembly, the delegates voted to make Peacemaking a topic for study and action in our congregations – quite fittingly, when you consider that one of our seven UU principals is the goal of a world community with peace for all.

My desire to preach on the topic of peacemaking dates back much further than its selection as a UU study issue, though.

My call to preach on peace goes all the way back to 1988—which for me marked the heady days of fifth grade. Yes, I am confessing that I have been waiting to preach on this topic since I was ten. Or, to clarify, that is the year that the peace sermon in me was born – even if I wasn't entirely aware of it at the time.

Aside from the fact that I have been waiting two decades to preach on it—and the fact that in only my second sermon here with you, I've bitten off one of the heavier topics in the spiritual canon—let me assure you, I don't feel any pressure.

But I digress. Getting back to 1988: As I mentioned, I was ten years old. And as it happened, I was perhaps a bit more serious-minded than the average person my age. Who knows precisely when it happened, but the political bug bit me early and even as child, I had developed a hyper-awareness of issues like nuclear disarmament and test-ban treaties. I was proud that my UU church had a sign out front that said “This is a Nuclear Free Zone.”

As a way of expressing my belief in the importance of disarmament and seeking an end to war, I started my own one-child PR campaign for peace. Using a bottle of whiteout, I painted peace signs on all of my school supplies—my pencil case, my trapper keeper organizer. You name it, I put a peace sign on it. I guess I was more worried about peace than the noxious effects of the white-out fumes.

Looking back, my peace sign campaign was probably more successful in earning me the nickname “Peace Mara” amongst my classmates than it was in actually contributing to disarmament.

If only being a proud PR person for peace stayed that easy.

In the intervening decades, as my knowledge of the related policy issues grew, my untainted belief in the real possibility of peace waned. As I understood more about how the world works—how decisions get made, why wars start—I became familiar with the dual demons that are the enemy of any efforts for social change: DESPAIR and CYNICISM.²

² In my personification of “despair” and “cynicism,” I am indebted to Kathleen Sheeder Bonnano and her personification of death in her poem, “When Death Barged In,” in *Slamming Open the Door* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2009).

Perhaps you've met them too.

Just in case, let me introduce you. This is DESPAIR, also known as the "absence of hope." DESPAIR first knocked on my door when I began to learn how vast and intractable the world's conflicts really are.

She moved in with me during the fall of 2002 when Congress voted overwhelmingly to authorize the war in Iraq, despite the protests of my boss and others like him. She outstayed her welcome in the months that followed, as the war started—and then as the body counts began.

DESPAIR still drops by for a visit in the morning when I read the inevitable headlines that report the devastating effects of war and violence, reminding me of the harm that people do to one another.

Now, this is despair's cousin, CYNICISM. We first met some time later when, already disheartened about the state of the world, I came to understand just how large its problems were in comparison to my small effort and how removed I was from those who had any real power to affect events.

CYNICISM makes himself known most often when I am contemplating taking some action for the greater good—but the question arises:

What good will this really do, anyway?

DESPAIR and CYNICISM—they come in many guises and at different times. But no matter when they arrive, they always manage to sap our energy and erode our resolve.

That is why, I think we need the International Day of Peace. Like a high holiday which calls us back to the faith we love, Peace Day asks us to return to hope—the place we lived in before DESPAIR and its crabby cousin entered the picture.

And this is also why we need the poet, who instructs us that, though the enemies of hope are real, though there is truth to the stories they tell—there is another truth, a brave and startling truth, which vindicates HOPE after all.

"When we come to it," Maya Angelou writes,³ "then we must confess:

That we this people . . . created on this earth, of this earth,
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without crippling fear."

³ Maya Angelou, "A Brave and Startling Truth," read by the poet at the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, June 26, 1995 (New York: Random House, 1995).

“We must confess,” she preaches, “that we are the possible, we are the miraculous.”

The miracle of peace is in our power to bring about.

This part of Angelou’s poem reminds me a lot of the book I mentioned during last Sunday’s sermon—Ben and Roz Zanders’ the *Art of Possibility*. Do you remember that I told you there were several sermons in their one book?

Well, another thread of their narrative synergizes powerfully with Angelou’s call to the day of peacemaking. It’s what the Zanders call “being a contribution,” the idea that each of us has something meaningful and important to offer the world.

I want to share with you a version of a related story the Zanders tell.⁴ This story takes place many, many years ago in an old monastery that had fallen on tough times. The order of which the monastery had been a part was the victim of religious persecution—and its membership had been reduced to only five members, including the Abbot.

One day, the Rabbi from a nearby town came to the monastery to have a few days of peace and quiet reflection. One afternoon over tea, the Rabbi, whose synagogue was also down in numbers commiserated with the Abbot. They both wept over the fate of their beloved communities.

As the Rabbi got up to leave, the Abbot stopped him and said, “wait, before you go, do you have any advice that might save the monastery?”

“Well,” the Rabbi replied cryptically, “I don’t really have any good advice. But I can tell you this: the Messiah is one of you.”

When the other monks heard from the Abbot what the wise Rabbi had said, they wondered what he meant. The Messiah at the monastery? Well, of course it must be the Abbot, they thought. But then, what about Brother Tom, who is clearly a holy man – or what about Brother Phil – he is clearly wise.

And then, they each thought to himself, “The Rabbi couldn’t mean me, could he? I couldn’t be that significant? Or could I?”

As they contemplated who among them was the Messiah, an interesting thing started to happen.

⁴ Rosamond Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 52-53. I have adapted this version for the sermon from the Zanders’ text.

On the off chance that indeed the Rabbi was right, they each began to treat another with enormous respect—and on the off chance that he himself was the Messiah, they each began to treat themselves with enormous respect.

In the months that followed, those who visited the Monastery sensed the respect that emanated from the monks and filled the air. Many young men were so inspired by the aura of kindness and peace they felt at the monastery that they felt called to sign on as monks. And in just a few year's time, the monastery was thriving once more, serving as a beacon of light and love for the whole region.

What the Zanders' story tells me is this: Transformation happens when, instead of waiting for a savior, we each begin to act like we—little old us—have the power to change the world.

We are neither devils nor divines, Maya Angelou tells us, but still we have the capacity to choose peace for our world.

The question remains though: How? How do we fashion peace for our planet? How do we tackle such an enormous undertaking without giving way to despair?

Where on earth do we begin?

And here is where we need the wisdom of another poet, who instructs us that we can start by praying for peace in the midst of our mundane everyday lives.

It doesn't take much, Ellen Bass tells us, and you can do it at any time.

“Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace, feed the birds, wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine for peace.”⁵

Paint peace signs on your pencil case.

And when you become discouraged, she says, just breath in.

“With each breath in, take in the faith of those who believed when belief seemed foolish, who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.”

My friends, when the glow of tomorrow has faded—and we find our hope ebbing once more into despair, let us take heart. Take heart in the long history of peacemakers in whose brave footsteps we walk. And take heart, too, in the wisdom of the poets – who counsel us to stay the course.

And so, with the poems whispering and hymns ringing in our ears, let us go forth and observe the International Day of Peace.

⁵ Ellen Bass, “Pray for Peace,” see http://www.ellenbass.com/pray_for_peace.php.

But let us also dream of and work for a world when the observance of Peace Day is no longer needed—because the time the Prophets told of is finally here:

The time when the people of this earth:

*. . . shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore.⁶*

My friends, this is my prayer:

May the peace we feel in the presence of our glorious Green Mountains be the peace that is felt all across the world—

Peace—from the homes in our neighborhoods to the most distant shores.

Peace—from the streets of our cities to the plains of Darfur.

Peace—from the hills of Afghanistan, to the deserts of Iraq.

Peace, peace, peace.

Less harm, less harm, less harm.

May it be so, tomorrow—and in all the days to come.

Amen.

⁶ Isaiah 2:4.