

United Nations Day  
October 22, 2006  
First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo

**CHALICE LIGHTING**

This morning we light our chalice with a quote from Dag Hammarskjold.

"Each day we must hold out the chalice of our being, to receive, to carry, and to give back."

**SERMON**

Today we celebrate United Nations Day and I am so glad. You see, in America, celebrating United Nations Day is not high on the agenda. I'm not even sure if it makes a footnote on the calendar. About all that we hear in the states about the UN is the current regime's side of the story, why the UN should be dissolved and why the United States should not pay its back dues. But of course, we use it too. I'm sure you remember the case for Saddam's build-up of weapons of mass destruction. Fortunately the United Nations has survived and is hard at work trying to bring peace to the world. I am thankful for Canada and other nations who find working for peace is of utmost importance.

The United Nations is an amazing effort on a global scale. Chartered with aspirations and hope, the United Nations is also an organization that knows peace doesn't come easy. Peacemaking takes a tremendous amount of hard work, dedication and sacrifice. Resources, both human and monetary, are also necessary. We all feel the price not only in our wallet but also in our hearts. My

heart is saddened each time I hear of a peacekeeper's death in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Peacemaking is not risk-free and is certainly a work in progress.

Peace is a complex and difficult goal. The world seems to be so full of conflict, strife and outright war – not to mention genocide, ecocide and biocide. We have never had so many options to destroy ourselves, nature, and the planet. Just think of the unabated rape and genocide in Dafur, the terminator seed in industrial farming, and the expansion of nuclear weapon capability in Middle East and North Korea. The world has numerous challenges before it. The United Nations with its mandate for peace is one of our best hopes. Yet peace seems so elusive.

In May 2001, a six-year-old Afghanistan child in a refugee camp responded this way when asked about peace. She said, “ I don't know what peace is, but I know I love it.”

“I don't know what peace is, but I know I love it” - how hopeful, sweet and sad. It makes me wonder about the state of humanity.

Has our collective soul become so overwhelmed that we are immune to the dangers, deaf to the cries of our fellow human beings, and already too stressed and overworked to care? Is this refugee child too far removed from our doorstep? Or could we make the same statement as she did “I don't know what peace is, but I know I love it”.

In seminary I had a roommate who is a 13-year Marine veteran. We had many discussions about war and peace. From his point of view, peace has no merit.

Those who march, picket and participate in anti-war activities are naïve and foolish. War is real. His contention is that it is the nature of humans to battle. At our core, we have a will to survive. Everything is fine until your desire to survive overlaps my desire to survive. That is where the battle begins.

In much milder terms than war, this “will to survive” reminds me of another friend who grew up in a large family. At dinnertime, she couldn’t wait until someone passed the potatoes. Manners were for show and left you hungry. Each person at the table had to fend for themselves to fill their plate. It took a certain amount of aggression to survive.

I cannot disagree with the argument about the will to survive. I want to survive and I’m sure you do too. But there is enough food to go around. The problem arises when there is not enough willpower or cooperation to assure that all are fed. Many of our wars and conflicts are about the distribution of resources, whether it be food, water or energy. It seems that as human beings in the twenty-first century, we should be able to work these things out so that everyone has a chance at survival.

The other issue in my roommate’s comments concerned protesters. The real question behind his image of the naïve protester is the question of peace itself. What is it? What is peace? How do we define peace? It is not much different than the six-year-old refugee girl’s statement about peace. It is difficult to define. Our language leaves us grasping for something we long for, hope for and believe in, but can’t quite put into words.

On the other hand, war is definable. When shots are fired you know it. But when shots are not fired, do you have peace? Is peace defined by the absence of war? Is peace the silence between volleys? Does peace last for four seconds, four decades or forever?

The best way I can define peace is as a working definition. I like the answer an ancient Chinese philosopher gave when asked about another word: hope.

“Where is the road called hope?”

He answered

“It does not exist,

but as people walk upon it,

it comes into being.”

The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children, pg. 103.

Isn't peace the same way? Peace is certainly a participatory activity. From the sidelines peace is only the absence of war. Real peace is about walking the road. Peace is from our efforts and is a process. It also contains hope. It is an investment in survival both now and for the future. This is what the United Nations is about. It knows peace is a work in progress and it is working to make peace a reality.

So how do we as Unitarians define peace? How do we, who live in this world as a religious people, define peace? I don't think we have an easy definition either. One resource we have is the seven principles. A few minutes ago we read them responsively. While the principles are not perfect and are definitely not a creed, they do express some of our beliefs and desires. While all of the principles refer

to how we interpret and live in the world, it is the sixth principle that is the most direct in stating our hopes:

“The goal of world community  
with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

If you were to read the charter for the United Nations, this Unitarian principle of “world community with peace, liberty and justice for all” would be a good summary. It is not surprising that Unitarians have been active in the continued efforts of the United Nations. Unitarians have either founded or help found other noble organizations as well: Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, the International Association for Religious Freedom.

This is valuable work, but most of us have very little personal interaction with these large organizations. They all seem so far away and removed from our daily existence - except Unitarianism. Our principles, including “the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all” is global and personal.

The seven principles begin with “we shall affirm and promote...” This wording is a call to action. It involves the body, mind and spirit. We intellectually consider the option for peace, we affirm its worth and we do something to make it happen. This is how Unitarians engage in the world around us. We know that our personal peace is not secure until our neighbors have peace as well. Our neighbors are not only global but local. This includes the aboriginal family next door and the shut-in down the street. Our neighbors are also the hungry, homeless and destitute.

Often we don't know what to do to help make other's lives better. We rely on social services and the government but the issues don't always get resolved. So what are we to do? How can we share our peace?

I think the United Nations sets a good example. The United Nations works by letting all members come to the table. Each representative has a seat and the right to be heard. Sometimes the words spoken are not easy and intense debate follows. But each nation still has a seat.

This reminds me of the Round Table from King Arthur's legend. The size of the round table varies by account – with anywhere from 50 to 250 to 1600 seats. I particularly like the version where King Arthur sits on a dias in the center of the table. In the United Nations, this would akin to the rotating role of Secretary-General with just enough visible leadership to control chaos, but always a place for everyone to be heard. At King Arthur's round table, there was also an empty chair. This seat was for the next person to come. The United Nations as well is open to the next nation wanting to work for peace. We too leave empty seats in our fellowship hall for the next person.

But why come to the table? The United Nations has peace as its goal. But how does it do the business of peacemaking? It all begins at the table. By listening to neighbor countries, issues are brought forth that need attention. With everyone working together, possible action steps are discussed and when approved, are put into place.

But again, that seems so far removed from our daily lives, what does this have to do with us?

I believe making peace is all about us, as individuals and as community. The act of bringing all voices to the table - the legendary round table - sets an example of inclusivity, welcoming and listening. If we as individuals and as Unitarians are to bring peace, liberty and justice to all, then we must start where we are. That is here. And now.

It is one thing to issue an invitation, it is another to actually listen. What if the table wasn't in your kitchen? Would you be willing to sit at a table on the other side of town?

Everyone has a story. Communities have their stories. If we learn to take time to actually listen to these stories, then I believe that we will be on the road to peace, liberty and justice. Listening involves not only the ears but also the heart. We know what it is when we hear joy and we know when joy is missing. We cannot fix or solve everything, but sometimes just the act of sharing is enough, which means you have to be at the table. What to do will follow.

Annie Dillard in her book, For the Time Being, offers a rabbinical quote:

The work is not yours to finish,  
but neither are you free to not take part in it.

Dillard, Annie. For the Time Being. Vintage Books, New York, 1999. p. 201-202

That is true for the United Nations and for our neighborhood. We are compelled as humans and as Unitarians to walk the path of peace, liberty and justice. It is our job to make peace a reality.

To paraphrase the ancient Chinese philosopher quoted earlier,

“Where is the road called peace?”

“It does not exist,  
but as people walk upon it,  
it comes into being.”

May we help the refugee child understand peace and know it in her lifetime.  
May we also bring peace to our neighbors.

I would like to close with a reading from Marge Piercy.

## COUNSELS

*(#585 Singing the Living Tradition)*

We must sit down and reason together.

Perhaps we should sit in the dark.  
In the dark we could utter our feelings.

In the dark we could propose and describe and suggest.

In the dark we could not see who speaks  
And only the words would say what they say.

No one would speak more than twice.  
No one would speak less than once.

Thus saying what we feel and what we want,  
What we fear for ourselves and each other into the dark.

Perhaps we could begin to begin to listen.

The women must learn to dare to speak.

The men must learn to bother to listen.

The women must learn to say I think this is so.

The men must learn to stop dancing solos on the ceiling.

After each speaks, she or he will say a ritual phrase:

It is not I who speaks but the wind.

Wind blow through me.

Long after me, is the wind.

Blessed be and amen.