

THE TRANSCENDENT WITHIN

— by Jaco B. ten Hove, co-minister, Paint Branch UU Church — Feb. 11, 2007 —

“The first task of religion is to give importance to the relationship of every individual to the most inclusive transcendent dimension of reality he or she acknowledges.”

—Fred Campbell, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*

HYMN

The words of this hymn, #159—“This is My Song,” were written as a prayer for peace in the interval between World Wars I and II by poet Lloyd Stone [1912-1993] when he was 22 years old. The song has been recorded by numerous artists, from Joan Baez to the Indigo Girls, partly because of the beauty of the Jean Sibelius tune, *Finlandia* (which is used for the national anthem of Finland), but also because the message strikes a chord with anyone who can think beyond nationalism, which one hopes is a growing number of us.

Also known by the title, “A Song of Peace,” Stone’s words stir us by encouraging a global perspective that was certainly courageous in the mid 20th century, and still only slowly gaining traction here in the 21st: “O God of *all* the nations...”

It is not out of line to suggest, as has radical Catholic theologian Hans Kung has, that there will never be peace between the nations until there is peace between the religions. Let us sing this now as if our voices raised together here might urge us at least a little closer to that goal.

THIS IS MY SONG

This is my song, O God of all the nations—a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.
My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, and sunlight beams on clover-leaf and pine;
But other lands have sunlight too and clover, and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh, hear my song, O God of all the nations—a song of peace for their land and for mine.

READING

I think my retired Unitarian Universalist colleague Fred Campbell has contributed to the cause of world peace by writing a small but potent book called *Religious Integrity for Everyone*, based largely on a career of interacting with UUs of various theological stripes, an experience which led him to notice and describe some important unifying features amid all our vaunted theological diversity.

Drink in that book title one more time and imagine what it would mean if somehow, in this fractious world, there really were a way to ensure *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. He got my attention with this vision and I want to do my part to urge us at least a little closer to that goal.

So here's a passage from Fred's book that sets the stage for this possibility, by expanding religious intention and language...

(Philosopher) Alfred North Whitehead observed that when we humans are religious, we deepen (our) understanding of Self, Community and God [in "Religion in the Making"]...

Let me substitute *transcendence* for Whitehead's *God* and allow God to be one form of transcendence. Now I may observe that religious meaning always includes at least three levels of human living: self, community and *transcendence*. It is every religion's function to expand and integrate these three levels...

Transcendence (means) "larger than"... Communities are larger than individuals (and) God is a word always used to point to some inclusive reality much larger (still). At its heart, the function of religion defined this way is to enable human (beings) to...relate to those aspects of reality that transcend individuality...

(We) have many basic experiences involving transcendence. To cry, to laugh, to feel lucky or unlucky, to feel wonder or awe, to feel guilt or shame, to feel uplifted or fulfilled—all involve transcending the present moment... As (we) age, (we) participate in the larger or transcendent process of creativity that permeates our universe...

I suggest that the creativity of our Universe is the most inclusive...transcendence that every human being may experience [pgs. 23-4, 28].

SERMON: *The Transcendent Within* — Jaco B. ten Hove

"Transcendence means 'larger than.'" Perhaps you can recall early life moments when your world was enlarged. When I was a child, my parents arranged through the American Field Service program to have a series of foreign college students come live with us for semesters at a time in our home in suburban New Jersey. I vividly remember two young women, from Japan and Italy, living in our home, but I only recall the name of Sam Elad from Cameroon in Africa, perhaps because he came back for a second stay with us.

What I remember was that Sam was a cheerful, kind, round-faced fellow with a beautiful accent, who had lots of animated conversations with my mother. Every now and then he would dress up in his really colorful Cameroonian finery and go off to some event and my eyes would bug out of their skinny young sockets at the look of him. The Japanese exchange student also had stunningly different kinds of clothes that she would wear periodically, usually very silky and shiny.

This was a formative era in my life when I began to transcend the boundaries of my own family unit and, in Fred Campbell's words [from the reading], "participate in the larger process of creativity that permeates our universe." My worldview expanded because of living day-to-day with folks from other cultures who were willing to step out of their worlds into mine. I knew and was known by these guest residents and I learned a lot about their homelands. The planet became much less of an abstraction for me.

I may never get to visit Japan or Italy or Cameroon, but there will always be a soft spot in my heart for those countries because of these very temporary but significant relationships early in my life.

In a very real way, these encounters helped me to learn to *transcend* first my self, then my family unit, and then my country, even—to understand that there was a lot more of value out there beyond my own immediate world. I then internalized that broader perspective and "took to heart," as the saying goes, a wider reality shown to me through my wider relationships.

I developed a sense of what I call the Transcendent Within, by which I mean an internalization, a psychic integration of this simple truth: that life is larger than me alone. Transcendence encourages a sense of proportion that, when taken to heart, deepens both awareness and humility.

I discovered there was more of this larger creativity going on beyond my own personal view and that I could embrace this wider reality and grow with it without being unduly threatened. This was, I believe, the interpersonal grounding that enabled me to be open to global thinking and interfaith relations as I matured.

Later, in high school, I applied to and became vice-president of a small group called the Domestic Exchange, an annual program that connected with another high school in some other part of the United States and traded weeklong visits in the spring. Each of us paired with a "brother" or "sister" from the other school and lived with that family during the exchange week.

In early 1968 we traded visits with an all-black high school in New Orleans and had a great time together on both ends. In March, I slept on the couch at my brother Frank's house down there, and in April he came up and stayed with us. In one big group, they took us all over New Orleans and we showed them New York City...in early spring...1968.

Between the two exchange weeks, Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated. We relied on the relationships we established in March to help us all process that tragedy in April. My own sense of that moment in history deepened immensely because of this opportunity to stay connected with people from way outside my own local community.

Relationships with people who are different will really pull you beyond your own little circle, so that you can transcend your own ego and understand that there is indeed a much larger picture into which you fit. This sounds pretty straightforward, maybe even obvious, but part of the reason Lloyd Stone's lyrics in *A Song of Peace* [sung earlier] are so moving is because they poetically remind me that, yes, "other hearts in other lands are beating, with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine."

And I *need* that reminder. It is way too easy to stay caught up in my own frequently self-absorbed dramas and preoccupations.

Furthermore, I think that the shared human experience of perceiving *something* transcendent—larger than me and my tribe, known by whatever name, religious or not—can provide common ground on which we all might be able to stand and at least talk civilly about our infinite perspectives, or perhaps even share a unifying reverence for life.

But we often forget and neglect the broader levels of transcendence that can unite us across narrow, near-sighted boundaries. Sometimes our language gets in the way; I agree with Fred Campbell that the name God, for instance, is just not big enough to encompass the full, transcendent creativity of the Universe and its exclusive use just does not allow "religious integrity for everyone." I think the ancient Hebrews had the right idea when they refused to specify *any* name for what is essentially ineffable, indescribable.

In this increasingly crowded and complex world, we desperately need to find productive common ground; but our civilization shrinks when we ignore the human connectedness that transcends local affiliations. I can sense incredible opportunities for leaps in human consciousness that are already emerging in this 21st century, but our often self-absorbed, too-often violent human nature is certainly an obstacle.

I suspect that if you examine almost any strife-ridden sector of our world, including in the US, you'll likely find conflict driven, at least in part, by the inability of some people to transcend their individuality and immediate community. Individual egos take control. Threats and insults, perceived and/or real, rise up to obscure the bigger picture of our common humanity. Relationships either get severed or never existed in the first place, which exacerbates the tension and allows a sense of separation to dominate. The "other," then, can be easily dismissed and demonized. This is the familiar storyline in almost every war, large and small—still!

And religion, of course, is frequently a large player in such a scenario. If your God is absolutely sectarian—promoting your religion's interests over others—you can be led to do horribly destructive things, in the name of that individual God. Rigid dogma seems to intentionally prevent its followers from acknowledging the validity of other theologies.

How much greater the odds for at least peaceful coexistence if there were "religious integrity for everyone" and a willingness everywhere to see that even if another culture understands the divine differently, it is a parallel construction of transcendent meaning—not necessarily better or worse, just another way to do the same, unifying thing, which humans have been doing since the beginning of consciousness.

This is the essence of Fred Campbell's radical suggestion of "religious integrity for everyone," which I think points accurately toward peace. But it is, of course, the standard *liberal* position, open-minded and willing to meet others halfway. How often do we get our outstretched hand slapped by those more interested in separation from and power over anyone who doesn't believe the way they do?

I've done enough interfaith dancing to see that the partners most willing to share the dance floor with me are usually the least dogmatic of the pool of religious leaders out there. The diverse and often challenging music we can hear in common seems to drive away others who are only comfortable if their particular theme song is playing.

As discouraging as this uphill trek toward global peace seems at times, I am buoyed by one particularly transcendent and momentous chapter in our national history, when motivated leaders created a magnificently American platform, on which we can still stand confidently and help forge a future of peace between the religions.

You probably know that our founders codified religious freedom into the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and we count on those formulations to protect the spiritual diversity that characterizes this country like no other. What you may not realize is that this was *not*

some grand visionary innovation whereby the Founders all said “Yes, indeed, let’s have religious integrity for everyone. Great idea!”

No, indeed. The primary model of government they were all grounded in was the European version of theocracy, whereby a state-supported religion joined with political forces to rule the land. Among many of our Founders—with some very notable exceptions, such as Jefferson and Madison, certainly—the intention was to go the theocracy route again, only within a more representative political system. There was significant sentiment among the dominant Anglican/Episcopals in the south and the dominant Congregationalists in the north that their religion should be established alongside the new national government.

This is a quick oversimplification of the intriguing ways the drama of religious liberty unfolded, but the gist of the usually untold story is that neither of the two major religious forces at the top and bottom of the colonies could muster enough power to carry the day. Plus there were all these other budding religious groups in between, who, in the emerging American way, had a voice and resisted the idea of any one state-sanctioned religion.

My point is that some noble early American religious leaders very likely would have set up an Anglican or Congregational theocracy if either group had been able to force this on the rest, but instead *they had to compromise!* The Founders inclined toward theocracy had to let go of their dogmatism and allow Jefferson’s visionary, if controversial Statute of Religious Liberty in Virginia to become the model for the new federal state.

In that small window of time, the codification of religious freedom in our sacred founding documents was accomplished, but it was only agreed upon begrudgingly by many, in order to keep the nascent nation moving forward. (And note that the forces of theocracy never died off, either, but kept trying to steer the federal vessel toward narrower religious channels—a relentless effort that continues to this day.)

But it was a transcendent moment when our founders “took to heart” the wider reality and implications of their project and agreed to let go of partisan religious partialism so that a broader vision might issue forth a call to *both* unity and diversity.

I think we have, over the generations since our founding, internalized—psychically integrated—a distinct American ethic of religious freedom, even though there are still those who would retract this right and wed church and state in a heartbeat if they had the chance. Happily, the larger perspective of the good of the whole has—so far—held enough sway to create in our land a general sense of what I call “spiritual spaciousness,” whereby there is room for many religious impulses to coexist relatively peacefully and participate in the inclusive “creativity of our Universe.”

Occasions of obvious intolerance notwithstanding, much of America has an understanding of the Transcendent Within, so that we appreciate the value of things larger than our ego, larger even than our own local community or nation. “Other lands have sunlight, too, and clover; and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.” We may not like everything we see “out there” but a great national tradition of liberty and openness has taken hold of us “in here.” We have taken to heart a larger perspective that calls to us with a different voice than our familiar family or nearby neighbors.

And this, I believe, is the path America and the global community are increasingly called to pursue, at least if peace has any attraction. I’d like to think that things may finally be getting to the point where various intractable elements currently ascendant in our government and around the planet are going to see—as did our early Founders who were theocratically inclined—that they cannot dominate a world of such diversity in the way they might like to, with power *over* others.

In order to keep our human civilization creatively moving forward into the complicated future that awaits, we will *all* have to compromise, even if begrudgingly. We can look to the model of our American founders for inspiration. We need some 21st century Jeffersons who can help us find, describe and explore a “God of *all* the nations.” Global leadership now means awareness and articulation of common values that transcend individual egos, religious absolutism and unilateral political wishes.

Then, soon hopefully, more and more influential players will release at least some of their dogmatic thrusts, “take to heart” the need for spiritual spaciousness in a tightening biosphere, and allow—yes, I’m not afraid to say it—a more *liberal* approach to provide the framework for peace between the religions. Then perhaps we can get busy cooperating more effectively on the rather demanding issues that confront our entire species, while upholding the values of liberty for all and “religious integrity for everyone.”

Okay, this is pretty large, heady stuff. How, you might well ask, can we individual religious liberals participate in such a grand scenario toward a greater peace? I have two suggestions in that direction.

First of all, we must hold our own elected leaders accountable to the American ideal and heritage of compromise amid diversity. Unilateral belligerence, if it was ever appropriate, is certainly an untenable activity today, and some people need help realizing this. By appealing to the example of our own American history, we liberals need not cede one iota of patriotic ground when we call for political proportion and peace-mongering. Our

collective 21st century well being just cannot afford the crippling costs of diplomacy that leads with a fist.

Even as we might endeavor to transcend individual egos, our individual *voices* matter and can urge a broader perspective on leaders and neighbors alike. Find your voice and sing out a “song of peace for lands afar and mine.” Cross-cultural collaboration *is* demanding, but we can see all too clearly what the alternative brings.

And secondly, let me suggest that the “spiritual spaciousness” of our American religious landscape is a reflection of the spiritual spaciousness inside each of us. Do you feel like you have enough “room” inside you to at least acknowledge other religious perspectives that do not come easily or naturally to you? Can you “take to heart” the diversity within your own congregation, let alone the growing diversity in your neighborhood and region?

This is a 21st century challenge before us: to internalize our vaunted principles so they are more than lip service, so that they are modeled by our consistent behavior, behavior that bespeaks peace. To the extent that we can move our culture forward in ways that honor the individual, yes, but also transcend our very human egos and seek commonality beyond partialism, we will be ambassadors of peace, locally and globally.

Take a deep breath with me now, and another, and imagine that with each such breath, you can intentionally expand your inner boundaries and create a growing capacity for spiritual spaciousness, an internal engine of loving spirit that contributes your life energy to the greater goal “of peace for their land and for mine.”

The circle of mutual creativity grows with our increasing centeredness, as we both locate ourselves in the larger transcendence of an interconnected world and take that experience to heart. Let us strive to be as aware of our transcendence as the Buddhist monk ordering a hot dog—“Make me one with everything.”

Let our next steps bring us closer to each other and to the goal of religious integrity for everyone. Go in peace, my friends. BE peace.