

SOVEREIGNTY IN EACH OTHER'S BACK YARD

A sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — January 20, 2008

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jaco B. ten Hove

We join together today in the glow of another long weekend honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., who is gone from us now almost exactly 40 years. Personally, I never tire of hearing him speak. The recordings are often faint and scratchy, from a tech era also 40 years old now. But the power of his message and the impact of his witness almost always stir me—for some reason this year more than ever.

He is just one of the most inspirational voices and leaders of all time, with a resonant relevance that is still teaching me important things and challenging me to live up to a beautiful, universal ethic of unity and fairness for all people. His recorded eloquence and historic testimony live on, thankfully.

I heard a song for the first time yesterday, with a simple but evocative motif, singing about and speaking to him through the four decades past, as snippets of his “I Have a Dream” speech hovered over the music. “We miss you, Martin,” the singer said. “It would be great to hear your voice again... Thank you, Martin.”

I realized that I really do long for his courageous leadership, his progressive insights, his piercing but loving critique of our American culture, a society which has gotten very mixed reviews since he went down. But his vision is in us, in me—not just because I was at a very formative age in 1968 when he died, but because I’ve tried to pay attention to his enduring message as I’ve matured, especially in my ministry. He was certainly on to something then and he still is. Thank you, Martin.

So I call us into worship today, dedicating my sermon to the memory and spirit of this great player in the American story, who told us we “must evolve for all human conflict a method

which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”

Yes, *Love Will Guide Us*, which is **SONG #131** (Sally Rogers)...

(“Love will guide us; Peace has tried us; Hope inside us will lead the way...”)

SONG #95: *There Is More Love Somewhere* (African American hymn)

(“There is more love somewhere; I’m gonna keep on ‘til I find it; there is more love somewhere.”)

CHOIR: *My Soul is a River*, by Ben Allaway

“My soul is a river windin’ through a weary land.

Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream, washin’ o’er a thirsty land.

My soul is a river, your soul is a river, join up down the river, fill a mighty ocean with peace.”

SERMON: SOVEREIGNTY IN EACH OTHER’S BACK YARD

Jaco B. ten Hove

My soul is a river, your soul is a river, join up down the river, fill a mighty ocean with peace. That is a *mighty* powerful image. Any ocean touches many shores; if it were filled with peace, think of the harmony that could wash up onto so many fractious lands. Such healing waters would spread a unifying connection across artificial boundaries, to remind us that even amid great diversity, we are all one and should interact as grateful co-creators of a mutually fulfilling planetary culture.

Poet/composer Ben Allaway drew from the Prophet Amos [5:24] to compose this piece a few years ago, in honor of the 75th birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I have previously used the King holiday to speak about peace, as I do again today, because the message that his life’s work epitomized resounds in me as a prophetic inspiration urging us toward peace in a most inclusive, if also demanding way.

Dr. King was not about a soft-headed, wishy-washy peace that everyone can blithely nod at and then walk away from. When he declared—“*True peace is not the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice*”—he was pointing to a formidable, visionary path that I believe

will and should animate us for many decades to come. It is “the presence of justice” that will “fill a mighty ocean with peace.”

But there may be no more challenging path for us to walk than identifying and embodying “the presence of justice,” so we need all the help and reminders we can get. Even just defining what constitutes “justice” in a 21st century, post-modern era is a daunting task. I call to our attention the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a very important step in the right direction, and this year we celebrate its 60th year of existence, but how often do you see it referenced?

I predict that in the more distant future, our descendants will look back upon this document as one of the most important guiding items to come out of the 20th century, but it often feels to me like world leaders are too busy putting out fires and posturing themselves politically to honor its profound directives—which, if followed, would lead the world inexorably toward justice and peace. Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for yourself and see what you think [<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>].

Just a year after creating that, the United Nations (in 1949) also substantially revised and ratified the Geneva Conventions, a notable series of treaties that established standards for international law around humanitarian concerns. Those must have been heady, idealistic, post-war times, when the scourge of global violence was recognized for what it truly is, and world powers once again temporarily aligned to try to prevent any more of it. But alas, how we forget and suffer from distractions.

Today I will first explore a particularly pervasive distraction, one reason I think we might resist efforts to move “Beyond War,” as one ambitious organization is called [<http://www.beyondwar.org/>]. And I will then point to some important endeavors that lift up the discipline, the practice of peacemaking. I hope to put some flesh on the conceptual skeleton of peace and shed a little more light on the emerging paradigm shift required for us to actively contribute to a path in this direction. For we can only “fill a mighty ocean with peace” one tributary at a time.

“Beyond War,” which is not a Unitarian Universalist group, per se—but could be—declares itself “based on three Foundational Ideas: War is obsolete. We are one on this planet. The means are the ends in the making.” Here “Beyond War” echoes a prophetic statement by Dr. King, who put it this way: “Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.”

And this becomes, for me, a formative guide: we must live our lives every day according to the values we believe in, such as peacemaking, if that is one of our values. Even as we might hope for a larger ocean of peace that will lessen global violence in our strife-ridden world, we are called to embody, in our every step, that same peaceful intention. When we don’t, and perhaps succumb to the temptation of solving small conflicts with even small violence, we contribute instead to the opposite momentum.

We are vibrantly imperfect beings, of course, and regularly fall short of our ideals, but strive we must, anyway, despite obstacles both personal and structural. (One reason we come together often in religious community is to help each other live out of our best selves, to find strength and renewal for encounters that do challenge us almost daily.)

I see a particularly insidious obstacle to our peaceful intentions, something that operates at both individual and societal levels. Like much of life, in reasonable doses it is benign, even beneficial. But when carried to an extreme, it fortifies a mentality of nearsighted violence. And we are seeing—indeed *reaping* the effects of this human capacity in the extreme, again at both levels.

In individuals we have identified one form of this obstacle as acute **entitlement**, when a person demands rights beyond what they might deserve, so much so that a negative effect is generated, adversely impacting others and likely the individual as well.

Entitlement is a perfectly legitimate and relatively neutral legal term, of course, but we also know it can, in severity, describe someone’s aggressive sense of privilege, a kind of blind

greed which in turn can incite conflict and even violence. Undue entitlement erodes the shared sense of community. A healthy self esteem is one thing, which everyone is entitled to, but blown up into self-absorption and noxious demand, it becomes like a cancer, unhealthy for all involved.

I start there on the personal level, but where I really want to go is to the macro, to a parallel idea that operates culturally, and I bring forth a word we really don't hear too much of these days: **sovereignty**. And maybe there's good reason why it is falling from use.

The traditional idea of sovereignty rightly portrays a benign power sustaining a healthy cultural identity and security. By definition, sovereignty implies supreme authority and/or independence. But it can also become a dressed up way of broadcasting a defensive nationalism—fervent, pent up, narrow, self-serving, aggressive.

I believe we are seeing sovereignty operate increasingly in the extreme, on an increasingly crowded planet. Perceived threats may be very real, but the response of a heightened sense of combative sovereignty does not exactly encourage reconciliation and usually makes matters worse, ironically improving the odds for more conflict rather than more security.

(As Worship Associate Marilyn Pearl illustrated earlier, in the Flaming Chalice Dedication,) when “our numbers increase and resources dwindle, people, whose relationships might otherwise be friendly or neutral, become competitive and potential enemies.” Sovereignty, ratcheted up, can feed an aggressive sense of regional entitlement. As global neighbors who are now in each other's back yards whether we want to be or not, we all need to craft new responses to perceived threats, new definitions of the word “security,” a new paradigm that empowers a greater peace for all—perhaps even a transcendent notion of *planetary* sovereignty.

I suspect we are very slowly realizing that an unbridled sense of sovereignty is no longer appropriate or in the best interests of our earthly experiment here amid all these fragile ecosystems. Especially since the first Earth Day of 1970, global developments have

increasingly and dramatically placed the world's doorstep at everyone's back yard. Higher fences no longer work to hide the *interdependence* of our world. Isolated *independence* is an anachronism. Interconnectedness is the real supreme authority.

The call of the 21st century, as I hear it, is to balance some appropriate, realistic level of sovereignty with the compelling challenges of cooperation on what we now at least sometimes refer to as our “global commons”—those dimensions of the Earth for which we are collectively responsible.

One hears murmurs of hopeful new ideas being tested—the Triple Bottom Line, for instance, which encourages a business model that is not just financially profit-driven, but adds two other measures of success into a company's operating formula: the impact of its work on both social networks and the environment. Using the Triple Bottom Line, all those factors are considered in whether a business is truly profitable. There are reasonable objections to this innovation, but it decidedly steers more toward the universal goal of sustainability than our current model, which seems instead to be designed to further enrich the already wealthy at the expense of everyone else.

What will it take to install new paradigm thinking, like equitable and sustainable business models, into our world economy? Such change may seem daunting, but if it doesn't happen soon, guess what? If the “global commons” instead becomes another global battlefield, very little will be sustainable, I suspect.

Instead, I prefer this rallying cry: “Make the world safe for d...iversity!” [Attributed to various sources: Futurist magazine, JFK, U Thant, others.] If that were our guiding ethic—judging all actions against a goal of increasing respect for diversities of all sorts—then we might very well usher in a new millennium of fruitful exchanges without violence.

Meanwhile, more and more voices are suggesting that an ethically effective gauge for any development, local or global, is how well it combines economic growth with social fairness.

“Social fairness” and respect for diversity—imagine those as the driving forces in our world!

Imagine a scenario in which we creatively use our growing knowledge of sustainable processes and our increasing global communication skills to actually *promote* bio-diversity and actually *ensure* a fair standard of living for as many people as possible. In such a world, oceans would be more likely to fill up with peace.

But attached to this attractive vision is a nagging question. To help achieve fairness and peace on a global scale, would we Americans give up some of our privilege, our sense of entitlement, perhaps? Hmmm...

What helps me is one of the key insights I’ve learned from the “deep ecology” movement: that a biosphere with many species is inherently more stable than one with only a few species. Diversity *improves* stability. It need not inspire threat. But *are* we making our planet and our civilization safe for diversity? More immediately, are our minds and hearts safe for diversity?

We might resist the challenges of diversity and lean toward familiar monocultures because we think that’s easier, safer—but this is an illusion. Monocultures ultimately foster weakness and *instability*. Interdependence and diversity may indeed be challenges to our intelligence, but they also hold out the hope for true, sustainable planetary health.

Imagine one whole world of creative stability, with all kinds of back yards prospering in proximity, in fair cooperation and partnership with each other and well balanced with nature, filling a mighty ocean with peace. That’s a big vision, to be sure. But, as it says in the Book of Proverbs [29:18], “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” It may feel unreachable to us, but holding the vision is utterly important. Strive for it we must, or perish we will.

I am encouraged by a statement from 20th century scientist and author Rene Dubos, who gets credit for the formative slogan, “Think globally, act locally.” He also reminded us that “Trend is not destiny... We cannot escape the past but neither can we avoid inventing the future.” Well, someone is already inventing the future, so why shouldn’t it be we who think differently than those who prefer to promote domination and disparity?

So how can we move—as move we must—from polite exploration and abstract imagery toward concrete manifestation of a new alignment, toward the actual implementation of social fairness? How do we get there?

One very helpful insight comes from Albert Einstein, who was, as usual, ahead of his time. More than half a century ago, he said:

“A human being is part of the whole, called by us the ‘universe,’ a part limited in time and space. [All of us] experience [ourselves], [our] thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.”

From <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Albert_Einstein>: “In some works the ultimate source (of the above quote) is stated to be a letter from 1950, but I find no quotations of it earlier than 1972 (*New York Post*, 28 November 1972). It was also published in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 1981, which can probably be trusted as reliable, and in many books.”

There are lots of practical pathways on which to pursue such a journey of “liberation” and “inner security.” I’ll just briefly mention a trio of what I think are notable efforts—one global, one national, and one UU-centered.

Vibrantly imperfect as it is, the United Nations still stands as our best and most practical hope for action toward global ideals. Our government seems to resist collaborating with the UN when “sovereign” US interests (often *business* interests) are threatened. But this attitude is ultimately self-defeating and isolating. We should be investing more not less

energy and leadership in helping the UN meet 21st century challenges. There is no alternative to this significant body and those who argue for our withdrawal from or dismissal of it have a long way to go to convince me.

Our Unitarian Universalist Office at the UN in New York City continues to do good work. It's been there since 1962, when

“US Ambassador to the United Nations and a Unitarian, Adlai Stevenson wrote to UUA President Dana McLean Greeley suggesting that each UU congregation nominate an envoy ‘...to promote better knowledge and understanding of the United Nations. In this disastrous and shrinking world it is no longer possible—if it ever was—for local communities to be more secure than the surrounding world. Our ultimate security therefore lies in making the world more and more into a community.’”

[from <<http://uu-uno.org>> “About UU-UNO; History”]

That was in 1962. Long live the United Nations!

A different sort of group came together in Washington, DC, four decades later in late 2002, as the Bush administration's drums for a War in Iraq were getting louder. Using the name “Win Without War” it launched a coalition of national organizations, now numbering around 40, including our UU Association and the UU Service Committee. The Win Without War website declares that its supporters...

“...are patriotic Americans committed to a US foreign policy that embodies our nation's highest ideals. We oppose the militarization of our foreign policy and its effects at home and abroad. We share the commitment to countering terrorism and weapons proliferation, but oppose the doctrine of unilateral military preemption. We believe that international cooperation and enforceable international law provide the greatest security for the United States and the world, and the greatest opportunity for people to live in free, healthy, and just societies.”

[<<http://winwithoutwarus.org/html/mission.html>>]

I couldn't agree more and invite your own engagement with this provocatively named group: Win Without War.

My third pathway to peace is our UU Association's latest and largest ever Congregational

Study Action Issue on Peacemaking [see handout content below this sermon, also found with lots of other good material at <www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/peacemaking>].

This is the first such Study that will be four years in duration, which is twice as long as previous issues were given. It asks a demanding question:

Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?

There are a great many resources and suggestions assembled to help congregations pursue this topic. It only remains for folks to engage with it, as interested. I invite your consideration of this, noting that March 1st is the deadline for formal comments about what should be included in the first draft of a denominational Statement of Conscience on this issue.

That will be one goal of this effort—a powerful and well thought out Statement that addresses the concept and possibilities of “peacemaking.” But the study itself, continuing for two more years, is a valuable opportunity to deepen our awareness of and commitment to the active values of peace. Notice that the title word is not just “peace,” but “peacemaking”; not just an abstract concept, but an action.

Peacemaking is both broad and deep, global and local, almost endlessly stimulating, and perhaps eternally relevant, not to mention more controversial than it might appear. Nonviolence has always been controversial, yet this is precisely what the Study question asks if we want to advocate, as a 21st century religious movement.

Would that Dr. King were still with us to help lead a continuing quest for nonviolent action. We miss you, Martin! Happily, we do have among us the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, whose writings and teachings have also been inspirational to me, such as this reminder:

“Peace is all around us—in the world and in nature and within us—in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; It is a matter of practice.”

[From “Life Is a Miracle” in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, By Arnold Kotler, 1996, Parallax Press.]

I believe it’s human nature to build bridges that weave hope into our lives. We dream, we conspire, we act to better ourselves and our world. (Our world, we are learning, *is* ourselves.) Sure, we face compelling challenges. And we are hard at work discovering the new pathways, the realignments that will meet those challenges.

Now the bridges to be built are ones that link isolated, defensive sovereignties into a global commons that encourages diversity and interdependence. We will create what we must demand: social fairness—one world, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all—a village of love, living side-by-side, fed by an ocean of peace.

We have this vision—an idealistic but essential one—to help keep us in motion toward the good. “It is not a matter of faith; It is a matter of practice.” And we’re gonna keep on ‘til we find it.

Love will guide us, peace has tried us, hope inside us will lead the way
as we—all the children of the Earth—seek to understand ourselves better
and find ways to embrace each other, locally and globally,
to fill a mighty ocean with peace.

Let your next steps be ones that bring fulfilling connection to you
as you spread the love.

Go in peace, my friends. BE peace.

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PEACEMAKING

The Congregational Study Action Issue (CSAI) for 2006–2010

ISSUE:

Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?

BACKGROUND AND REASONS FOR STUDY:

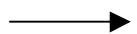
As the human population has increased there has been a corresponding increase in contact between groups of people who were largely isolated from one another in the past. This contact, coupled with differences in politics, religions, moral values, and beliefs as well as economic injustices and competition for resources, have led to countless conflicts around the world. Humankind struggles to achieve peaceful coexistence economically, socially, politically, and spiritually.

SIGNIFICANCE TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM:

Historically, Unitarian Universalists have agreed with the theory and practice of “just war,” or use of force in self-defense to preserve the life of another person. However, we have also supported peace and disarmament in over eighty resolutions since our merger in 1961. We offer counseling for conscientious objector status. We call on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Mahatma Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our principles are models for peacemaking yet we act as if violence is more effective than nonviolence in certain situations. As a religious denomination, we need to clarify our position and apply our covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

POSSIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS:

- Should we, the Unitarian Universalist Association and member congregations, adopt a specific and detailed “just war” policy to guide our witness, advocacy, and social justice efforts?
- Should we, the Unitarian Universalist Association and member congregations, reject violence in any form?
- How should we, the Unitarian Universalist Association and member congregations, identify the form of humanitarian intervention we will support in a particular situation?
- How might globally cooperative institutions such as the United Nations create and maintain effective conditions for human rights, economic justice, religious tolerance, and sustainable environmental practices?
- How do we open our hearts and our congregations to divergent voices on this issue?
- What are the hallmarks of peaceful cultures?
- What role do human physiology and psychology play in the perpetuation of violence?
- What is the role of electronic media and their content in cultural violence?



- What successful models exist for the reduction of violence in situations of conflict?
- How can we promote peaceful coexistence and eliminate verbal, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse in civic, congregational, family, and personal life?
- To what extent, if any, do gun control or gun possession reduce violence?

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Develop and offer curricula on the theology and practice of mediation, peacemaking, nonviolence, and pacifism within our communities.
- Advocate for peacemaking initiatives at all levels of government.
- Advocate for more support from the United States of America for the United Nations in its work of international peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance.
- Participate in nonviolent actions to promote peace including protest, public objection, civil disobedience, non-cooperation, witness, mediation, conflict resolution, and dialogue.
- Support the work of affiliated and associated organizations of the Unitarian Universalist Association involved in peacemaking, economic justice, human rights, interfaith cooperation, partnership building, conflict resolution, and disarmament.
- Join in the worldwide observance of A Season for Nonviolence.
- Honor and support the challenges of military and law enforcement personnel and their families.

RELATED PRIOR SOCIAL WITNESS STATEMENTS:

- Beyond Religious Tolerance: The Challenge of Interfaith Cooperation (1999)
- Establishment of the U.S. Academy of Peace and Conflict Resolution (1983)
- Sharing in the New Call to Peacemaking (1979)
- Disarmament (1970)

The preceding text was adopted at the 2006 UU General Assembly in St. Louis, Missouri, as the **Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI)** for 2006-2010.

Find out more at <www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/peacemaking>

INCLUDING:

Peacemaking Resource Guide and CSAI Comment Form

Educational Materials

Peacemakers Book Discussion Program

Peacemaking in Congregations: A Guide to Learning Opportunities for All Ages

UU Compassionate Communications Website (External)

Small Group Ministry Study Materials

Email Distribution Lists (Peacemaking-Network and Peacemaking-News Email List)

How to Involve Your Congregation in the Peacemaking CSAI & Statement of Conscience