

What Stands in the Way of Our Peace?

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

September 18, 2022

Over the last few years, being peaceful has become uncool. Around 2016, some of my liberal friends began to label being peaceful as “the easy way.” Not everyone felt this way certainly. Still, talking of peace, prayer, or inner sanctuary became risky and easily misunderstood. It was as though seeking peace meant you didn’t care. It felt to me as if concepts and spiritual practices that were, and are, core to who I am took on entirely different meanings in the public sphere. If you prayed, you weren’t doing anything. If you were at peace, you were not paying attention. Silence became synonymous only with complicity.

Let me repeat that not everyone was saying this, perhaps my sensitivity exaggerated this sentiment. Either way, I began to succumb to what I thought they were saying. I began to hide some of my spiritual practices and my belief in the power of peace and nonviolence. I questioned whether I was in denial about their efficacy or role in today’s world. I got quieter and less brave in sharing what really sustains me.

Things have not gotten better in the world over the last several years. There has been COVID, political unrest, wars, and climate crisis, just to name some of the things.

More and more, I am convinced it is peace we need. Yes, we need love. You know I am an advocate for radical, inclusive, brave, daring, authentic, healing love. We also need peace. I am not advocating for peace as a way to withdraw or live in denial about what is happening in the world. I am reminding you that we need to be committed to peace and experience it within ourselves so that we can respond to what is happening around us from a centered and kind place, as much as possible, for love without peace runs the risk of causing harm, while peace without love runs the risk of living apart from all that needs healing. I repeat: love without peace runs the risk of causing harm, and peace without love runs the risk of living apart from all that needs healing.

It is essential that we be able to experience the peace that we all have within ourselves, reminding us of life’s beauty and the rest of inner sanctuary. We are hungry to experience peace

between us, peace that allows us to feel our belonging. We need peace beyond us, so the world has a chance to remember its inherent goodness.

This peace is a feeling, a place within ourselves, and an experience in our bodies and hearts, not an intellectual concept. Even when something or someone outside of us helps connect us to it, we experience peace within ourselves.

Peace also has some of the characteristics of a verb. It is a way of responding to what is happening. It is aligned with kindness and compassion. It is powerful and strong. I’ve seen it break down strong defenses, often generations in the making. Being peaceful does not mean we don’t care. I cannot care well if I am at war within myself or the world.

If we aren’t experiencing peace at church and aren’t learning how to bring that into our day-to-day lives and the world, then where are we to find it?

As I mentioned last Sunday and in my recent pastoral letter, we are changing this year’s worship to uphold the sanctity of this space and intentionally rebalance Sunday services to focus more on offering a place of peace, spiritual nurturance, and restoration. I want you to breathe a sigh of relief when you cross the threshold into this sanctuary. I want you to find a place to leave your burdens, to be held, and to be inspired. You can always pick them up again on your way out. Or not.

Of course, we will always have justice as part of our worship. It is foundational to our Unitarian Universalist faith. So, in addition to the justice work we do during the week, we are going to be holding monthly Justice Sunday gatherings. These will take place once a month, right after worship ends. They will start with a soup-and-salad lunch and be followed by something focused on one of the many topics of justices we are involved with as a congregation. Our first is happening on October 2nd. I hope you will participate.

We all have a source of peace within us. Some call this self or soul. Others name it God, Goddess, or Gods. Still others experience it as

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goodness, compassion, or neutral mind. This place is calm. It is wise. It knows what to do and how to respond in any situation.

Neuroscientific research has proven that people are more engaged with life when they regularly experience feelings of peace.

Feeling peace in our body also supports our immune system and increases our resiliency. We see more opportunities in situations and are less likely to overreact. Experiencing peace increases our ability to be clear and direct when we need to be, while still being compassionate and kind.¹

Internal Family Systems, a therapeutic approach developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz, asserts that everyone is born with a self and that nothing can destroy it, though people's psyches certainly develop schemas and defenses to deal with trauma and pain. Dr. Schwartz identifies eight qualities a person feels when connected to this inner self: calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness.²

Religion and peace organizations have been naming this for ages. The Buddha said, "Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace." A Native American proverb reminds us, "It is no longer good enough to cry peace, we must act peace, live peace, and live in peace."

And what did Jesus say he left us, but peace? He didn't say he left love, though I know he wanted us to hold it as our guide. In the gospel of John Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

Peace most often comes in the most sacred and ordinary of moments. We look up on a morning walk at newly forming autumn color leaves and know peace. We laugh with friends and recognize the peace in its sound. We listen to beautiful cello music and our heart rates slow. The key is to take the time when these things happen to let them soak into our bodies and brains.

1 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-wise-brain/201312/enjoy-four-kinds-peace>

2 https://foundationifs.org/images/banners/pdf/The_8-Cs_of_Self_Leadership_Wheel.pdf

Psychologist Rick Hansen writes that it takes us significantly longer to remember peace than discord because of our negativity bias. He recommends taking ten to thirty seconds to feel peace when it happens, savor the moment so that it can begin to change our neural pathways. "Neurons that fire together wire together."³

The question is *what stands in the way of our peace?*

In my experience there are three things standing in the way of our peace – unhelpful mental constructs, self-judgement, and unresolved emotions, especially trauma of any kind.

Unhelpful mental constructs may include false beliefs, denial of pain, or unreasonable expectations we have of others and ourselves. Self-judgement can be feelings of guilt like "Who am I to feel peaceful when there is so much pain in the world?" Or we set such high expectations of feeling peaceful that we are sure to fall short.

Unresolved emotions including resentment, grief, and shame challenge our ability to feel peace. Thich Nhat Hanh said, "If we have not transformed our inner block of suffering, hatred and fear, it will prevent us from communicating, understanding, and making peace."⁴ I realize many of us were not taught how to process or resolve these emotions. Remember peace often comes in moments.

For many people feeling peace is difficult. For multitudes of reasons, we live in heightened states of fear and anxiety. Trauma results in physiological changes to our brains and hormones, changes that take time, skill, and support to alter. It can be done, though not all at once. It can change however, I know. When we let out the unresolved feelings trapped in our bodies, in helpful and healing ways, the peace that can follow is like none other. I wrote the poem Joanna read early in the service a few hours after releasing some of the pain I'm describing.

When asked how we make progress toward peace in our towns, countries, and the world, Thich Nhat Hanh replied, "We do this by uprooting the roots

3 Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, 1949

4 <https://www.lionsroar.com/listening-deeply-for-peace/>

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of violence and war within ourselves...The antidote to violence and hatred is compassion. There is no other medicine.”⁵

Lest we doubt the importance of peace, think of the most peaceful person you know or knew, someone you know well or someone you follow as a teacher. What is that person’s impact on your life? I hope you turn to that person often as one way to feel peace, be it listening to recordings, reading words, or seeing the person’s smile in your mind.

To know peace, you need to befriend yourself and be unafraid of what you find may inside. You need companions who will be with you as you share your journey and listen to theirs. You need a place and space to put down the worries and weight of this world, to simply allow what is to be for a while. Then when you are ready, after a minute, or twenty minutes, you can return to your day a little more aware, a little more able to connect, a little more willing to see what is and hold onto it.

This place, these walls, this online stream can hold that space. Together, we can enter that space and sometimes even hold each other’s hands while we go there.

I invite you to turn and look into the eyes of the person next to you just for a minute. This is an invitation. If you don’t want to do it, honor yourself. Pastoral Care Associates and Worship Associates will come around and do this with you if no one is close by. Just raise your hand. For those of you online, I’m going to look in the camera with you.

Peace. Goodness. Calm. It is within us all, and I invite you all to make room to welcome it. May you know peace, and may you be peace this day and every day, even if just for a minute, though I hope it will be for much longer.

Peace, amen, and blessed be.

5 Ibid.

My Own Shore

Poem by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

September 18, 2022

Dear God,
I wish I could write all day to you – a love song with my heart and pen.
I would say to you how patient and loving you are and how long you have waited for me.
I would serenade the brave little children in me who have clung to their past to survive,
 with hiding a virtue and lying a game.
Oh God, guide me as I come home to you, our soul – my heaven inside waiting to be free.
Teach me the rhythms of the universe:
 How to say no, who and when to trust.
 How to make love to the air and enemies of none.
My own voice and soul free at last – singing,
 make me a kingdom of your soul,
 make me a kingdom of your peace,
 as I do unto others, may you do unto my heart.
Singing forever free,
 forever free at last,
 forever free.

Welcome home.
 Dungeon doors are open.
 The bats and vile ones leave where they tortured me in memory and taunted me back then.
Come, rest, sleep.
Give over your trust to me.
 Welcome home.
Welcome to the living realms of your soul.
Its waves, its ocean are real.
 Her name is rhyme.
 Ride her crests and know you are loved, secure and soft.
Look for me today, and when you hear me, smile and wave and say,
“I have found my own shore.”