

The Heart of Peacemaking – 12/03/06

First reading

Responsive reading:

L: Our true home is in the present moment.

To live in the present moment is a miracle.

The miracle is not to walk on water.

The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment,
to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now.

Peace is all around us –

in the world and in nature –

and within us –

in our bodies and 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.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Second reading:

The following reading is from the Earth Charter, written in 2000 by Mikhail Gorbachev and other world leaders

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.

The Heart of Peacemaking – 12/03/06

Today I'm going to be focusing on Peacemaking as communication work and heart work.

We all know how communications can sometimes go astray. As an example of this, a little boy was standing in a church looking up at a plaque that had a long list of names on it. The minister happened to walk by and the little boy asked him what the plaque was. The minister said "Oh those are the names of men in our congregation who died in the service." The little boy turned pale and after a long moment asked in a very quiet voice – "Was it the first service or the second service?"

My own interest in peacemaking communication goes back to the anti-war movement in the 60's and also to my mother. She was a very spiritual and loving person and when I looked at the world through her perspective I could never understand the violence that was out there. I have been exploring peace more intensely as I've semi retired to help take care of my aging father, and have become very committed to a path of peace as my personal spiritual journey.

The journey, as I understand it, is about letting go of fear and as a moment to moment practice opening to our connection at the heart level. For the next few minutes, I invite you to open your hearts in sharing with me an exploration of the heart of peacemaking. I'd like to ask you to think of someone in your life that you would like to have a more peaceful connection with and keep that person in mind. Take a moment to think of someone, and to think of the kind of connection you'd like to have with them.

Last summer the topic of Peacemaking was selected by the our UU denomination's General Assembly as a four-year program for study within UU congregations. I talked a lot to the people involved at the General Assembly and ended up signing up to be part of the national committee working on it.

This is a new initiative in our denomination, to give four years for the in-depth study of a core ethical/spiritual issue, and there are high expectations that the process will be very meaningful, that it will deepen our faith and our effectiveness in living UU values.

At Wildflower we will be setting up Peacemaking Study groups in March, and participating in other programs over the next four years.

So, what is peacemaking?

First I want to define violence, as that which causes harm - physically, psychologically, or through economic and social systems. Psychological violence occurs when we demean, put down, criticize, or dehumanize others in our words or thoughts. Psychological violence can be nonverbal - it can be expressed in body language, or in our avoidance of certain people. Systemic violence, or structural violence, occurs when social institutions harm people through unfair or dehumanizing treatment. Institutionalized racism, classism or other kind of discrimination are forms of systemic violence.

Peacemaking means preventing violence at all these levels – physical, psychological, systemic. But it also goes further. The heart of peacemaking, as I have come to understand it, is building connections and relationships in which the needs and wishes of all sides, including our own, are respected, so that harmony and trust are the result.

Peacemaking – whether it’s with our children, friends, or with other countries -- is working to build a framework of mutual respect and trust in which all seek the well-being of all. It’s a way of being, of seeing every situation.

Obviously, peacemaking and justice are two sides of the same coin. You can’t have trust and mutual harmony if you’re not being treated fairly and justly. If you think of the last time you felt treated unfairly, and the anger you felt, you can see how incompatible peace and unfairness are.

Peacemaking is sacred work, with deep spiritual roots. Peacemaking is exactly what our UU Seven Principles call for, from the first principle “1) Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, “ to the last, 7) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

It’s exactly what all the major religions call for us to do. All of them emphasize our connectedness with each other, treating others as we would treat ourselves, our ultimate oneness of being. Jewish teachings call us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Christian teachings call us to even love our enemies and do good to those that hate us. Buddhist teachings call us to extend loving kindness to all beings, including non-humans. This interconnectedness is the spiritual basis of justice and peace. If I consider you to be as deserving of love as me, how can I wish to harm you?

So that’s what I see peacemaking as meaning – it’s an incredible challenge – for us personally, for me personally, for us as a human community on a shrinking planet.

The question then is: How do we meet that challenge? I’m covering a few points today, based on the work of a number of people including Marshall Rosenberg, and there’ll be a lot to learn over the next four years.

I have come to believe peacemaking starts with unconditional self-love and self-acceptance. Although many religious traditions focus on self-sacrifice and self-denial as a path to peace, I think that our modern understandings of psychology and the way systems work take us in a different direction. We all know of examples where self-denial and suppression of needs ends up resulting in violence towards others – such as religious leaders who try to embody extremely high moral values and end up having abusive sexual relationships. Modern psychology has taught us that when we try to suppress parts of ourself, the unexpressed energy can come out in destructive ways. Psychological health means self-acceptance, not denying our feelings or limitations but integrating them in a healthy way.

Unconditional self-love means being gentle to all of oneself- one’s animal side, one’s emotions, one’s mind, one’s aggressive side,. Being accepting of oneself in this way is the door to compassion for others.

But self-love doesn’t mean self-indulgence or self absorption. It means being responsible for our long-term happiness, which includes the willingness to let go of behaviors we have that cause harm to ourselves or others. For example, manipulating or dominating others into giving us what we want may feel good in the moment, but later the resentment of those we manipulate or dominate will come back to haunt us. And this is as true for our relationship to our friends as it is for U.S. relations to middle eastern countries. Enlightened selfishness leads us to genuine concern for the well-being of others, since our happiness is linked with their happiness in the long run.

Moving on to interpersonal peacemaking, I’m going to draw on the work of a number of people, especially Marshall Rosenberg.

So, how do we handle conflicts that occur when our needs and desires clash with another's needs and desires.

What makes peacemaking possible is that, at their roots, our needs and desires are pretty much the same. Our oneness of being is not just a mystical spiritual belief – we're all made of the same psychological stuff – as well as the same chemical stuff. Beyond physical survival needs, we all need love, recognition, respect, and belonging – our basic human connection needs -- can you think of anyone in your life who does not want and need these?

But, we all have very different strategies for getting these needs met -- some of strategies work brilliantly, some don't work at all. Our strategies depend on our interpretations of reality, starting in childhood – how we see the world.

For example, the need for respect and belonging is the same for Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa as it is for a gang leader in Los Angeles. When Desmond Tutu experienced violence in South Africa, his interpretation, perhaps guided by his faith, was that it was tragic and unnecessary. Based on this interpretation, his strategy for achieving respect and belonging in his life was to become a powerful voice for ending racism. The gang leader, after experiencing violence in his childhood, came to the interpretation that violence is the way people get what they want and it's unavoidable. Based on that interpretation, his strategy for achieving respect and belonging in his life was, logically, to be tougher and more violent than anyone else.

How we interpret reality shapes our reality.

I'm going to introduce two props that are used in Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication approach. The giraffe is a symbol of nonviolent communication – it has big ears to listen well with, and a wonderful long neck to stick out in peacemaking work. It has gentle eyes that see the inherent worth and dignity in everyone, and sees a reality that everyone's needs can be met in a just way if we're creative. The jackal is the symbol of violent communication – small ears and big teeth. The jackal has angry eyes that see others as threats, and sees a reality of winners and losers with not enough to go around.

We probably all know how easy it is to be a jackal. Some common jackal communications are:

Blaming: "It's your fault – I wasn't able to do that because of you."

Shaming: "How could you be so stupid?"

Making the other wrong: "I'm right and you're wrong – See, I win and you lose!"

Giraffe communication is very different. The giraffe is always respectful, and sees any hurtful behavior as someone's attempt to meet core needs met that just isn't effective. So the giraffe seeks to build trust and communication so that the needs on both sides can be effectively expressed and met.

The giraffe language for peacemaking is:

"We seem to be in conflict here. Could you share what your needs are in this situation, and I'll share mine, and hopefully we can come up with something that works for both of us."

And further – this is advanced giraffe peacemaking - the giraffe also has the view that, if someone is trying to hurt me, they are clearly wounded in some way – if they are spiritually and psychologically healthy they would be treating me with respect. How can I respond with compassion and understanding, looking past their behavior into their hearts, into the valid human needs underlying their behavior, and perhaps assist them in healing?

I'm going to give a few examples of peacemaking:

About ten years ago, in my church in NJ, there were some members who enthusiastically organized once-a-month neo-pagan services, with costumes, dancing, rituals, etc. At the same time, some conservative members of the church felt these services were undignified and embarrassing. The needs on one side were to be creative and freely expressive. The needs on the other were to have a sense of comfort, familiarity and dignity in the services. Both were entirely valid. But criticisms went back and forth until there was a lot of anger. Fortunately, leaders in the church stepped in to get the two sides to respectfully listen to each. Out of this dialogue, there was a new sense of understanding and renewed trust. The conservatives became more supportive, and the neo-pagans voluntarily brought in more traditional elements into their services.

Of course, there are times when the other side is not willing to collaborate in reaching a solution. In that case, peacemaking becomes more challenging. The nonviolent approach is to seek to understand the opponent's needs and honor them, anyway, even if other is not cooperating. Thus Gandhi was always respectful to the British, and tried to assist them in every possible way, even while he was completely firm that they needed to leave India. One of the English leaders complained to Gandhi, "I often wish you took to violence and then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But...you desire victory [through] courtesy and chivalry. And that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness." (p. 164, Gandhi the man)

On a much smaller scale, a few years ago, a coworker of mine, Carol, was on the verge of quitting her job because she couldn't stand her boss, Kim. I was reading about nonviolence at the time and she and I talked about what might be going on with Kim at a deeper level. After some reflection, Carol thought that possibly Kim was insecure and was being dictatorial in an effort to force the staff to respect her – an ineffective strategy to meet a valid core need. So Carol decided to try out chatting with Kim in her office for a few minutes every day, to try to see past the behavior to respond at a heart level to Kim's core human need for respect and acceptance. The chats became longer and longer, within a few months, Kim and Carol were good friends, Kim relaxed her management style, and Carol loved her job.

As another example of difficult peacemaking, I recently heard a story of an organization that brought together 6 leaders of the pro-choice movement and 6 leaders of the pro-life movement for a weekend. In phase 1, they were told to socialize over meals without any mention of political views. As a result, this built a little bit of trust and connection on a personal level. In phase 2 they explored what experiences led them to their positions on abortion. This sharing turned out to be very emotional and as they heard each other's pain and needs, they came to a deep understanding of each other – a heart-changing understanding, a letting go of some deep assumptions about the other. They went on to stay close as friends and worked to get their organizations to collaborate much more.

In deep peacemaking work we really open to the other, to what is going on in their heart and share our heart. In this process we may be transformed. We may learn, for example, as we open ourselves to see our behavior through someone else's eyes, how we are being hurtful. This can be a painful realization, but it gives us the opportunity to explore WHY we are being hurtful, which is almost always our own woundedness – usually we were hurt in that way and are simply acting the way we know. So in deep peacemaking, we have the chance to heal relationships and in the process may end up healing ourselves.

I had this experience with my sister – for years she had complained about my being critical of her, but I just couldn't see it because it was what I was used to, what I grew up with. We finally had a clash in which, at last, I really heard the pain behind what she was saying. At that moment I could suddenly see what she meant – I HAD been hurtful. And when I saw that, I also saw how I had been hurt by criticism as a child, and how I had internalized that as the way it's supposed to be. Just as the LA gang leader had

internalized that physical violence was the way it was supposed to be. It was a transformative experience, and I've been very grateful to her for getting me to understand that.

I'm going to say a little more about a couple of tools for peacemaking in our congregation. As I said earlier the ultimate goal of peacemaking is to create trust, harmony, and understanding. One important tool for this is appreciation. Appreciation is a powerful and loving kind of feedback – it nurtures the heart. It says you matter to me – what you do makes a difference to me. That builds connection and gives the other feedback on HOW they are contributing to your needs, which encourages them to do it more.

We do this when we say:

“I appreciate your work on the church's music program – I find the music very beautiful and meaningful, so your work really makes a difference for me.”

“Your giving me a hug every Sunday really makes my day – sometimes it makes my week!”

Along these lines, another valuable tool is to express appreciation for what's working well in a relationship, and, also, at the same time encourage shared thinking about how to continue to do well or better. When we do that we're building a good positive feedback loop that it keeps us in a place of harmony and trust - and conflicts are much less likely to occur.

In our covenant groups, for example, we close with time for “Likes and wishes”, a time to share what you liked about the meeting and to express anything that you would prefer to be different. This is really a peacemaking strategy. It reduces the likelihood that someone will be frustrated with something and never express it until it becomes a real problem. We can do this ‘Likes and wishes’ in all our relationships when we say:

“I really value our relationship – is there anything I can do that would make it even better from your perspective? I'd like to share some thoughts on what could be helpful to me.”

In conclusion, we each have an important role to play in creating a culture of peace, in our own lives and in our currently very violent U.S. society. In every situation that we cease to be at peace, when we feel irritated, annoyed, mistrustful, judgmental, we can stop ourselves and ask “What is my need here, and how can I meet that need in a way that also honors the needs of others involved?”

Take a moment to focus on the person you thought of earlier – try to see them with giraffe eyes, see their vulnerable humanness, and imagine what their underlying needs might be. Are they trying to meet those needs in an ineffective way – can you offer them another way? Can you connect at the heart level to find a resolution?

It's such important work! I hope that over the next four years we ALL become experts at peacemaking here at Wildflower and effective advocates for building a culture of peace.

I'll close with a quote from Haim Ginott, child psychologist and author:

"I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration; I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming."