

Preparation for Peace (theme for December)

Peace will come,
And let it begin with me.

Tom Paxton

Peace has long been a part of the UU tradition. As early as 1790, the Universalist General Convention shared a vision for peace: “there is a time coming, when the light and universal love of the gospel shall put an end to all wars.” In the 1800s, ministers Adin Ballou and William Ellery Channing wrote sermons on peace and non-violence. Henry David Thoreau’s 1849 essay *Civil Disobedience* influenced Leo Tolstoy and later Gandhi as they shaped their ideas on non-violent resistance, ideas which then influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Peace is a complex concept. We can examine peace through the lenses of a spiritual or psychological “inner peace, “outer peace” as actions promoting peace in the world, and “being peace.” Working for peace, however, may not be possible without acknowledging unpeaceful thoughts within us. Thomas Merton suggests, “Instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war.” As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, this is “being peace in order to make peace.”

Does “being peace” mean being passive? What is the difference between nonviolence and pacifism? Richard Rohr states, “Living a nonviolent life is no easy task; it is not simply pacifism.” American journalist Mark Kurlansky explains the difference this way: “Pacifism is passive; but nonviolence is active. Pacifism is harmless and therefore easier to accept than nonviolence, which is dangerous. When Jesus said that a victim should turn the other cheek, he was preaching pacifism. But when he said that an enemy should be won over through the power of love, he was preaching nonviolence.”

Activism, however, carries the dangers of moral certainty, which Lin Jensen warns us against: “I’m a peace activist, and . . . I sit in some sort of ethical judgment that war is wrong. I have a need therefore to understand how I can claim to know the right or wrong of anything. Judgments of right and wrong are a nearly irresistible enticement to pick sides. And that’s exactly why the old Zen masters warned against becoming ‘a person of right and wrong.’” Instead of absolute certainty about good and evil, Jensen suggests that what is offered to us is doubt and love. No certainty there.

Can we even think about world peace and unity? We may not be able to see a way to world peace as an actuality, but we can imagine it, as John Lennon’s song *Imagine* calls us to do. Calen Rayne, UU minister, states, “Our most important weapon against the enemies of peace and justice and compassion for everyone is our imagination.”

This essay was partially based on material in the *Touchstones* December issue, “Peace,” especially essays by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland, Lin Jensen, and Calen Rayne.

Here are some quotations you may wish to consider as you think about the topic of peace.

Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world. *Etty Hillesum*

You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist. *Indira Gandhi*

Her father said, “You know, my dears, the world has been abnormal for so long that we’ve forgotten what it’s like to live in a peaceful and reasonable climate. If there is to be any peace or reason, we have to create it in our own hearts and homes.” *Madeleine L'Engle, from A Swiftly Tilting Planet*

War and peace start in the hearts of individuals. Strangely enough, even though all beings would like to live in peace, our method for obtaining peace over the generations seems not to be very effective: we seek peace and happiness by going to war. *Pema Chödrön*

Our world seems a more dangerous place than it did before and it’s not remotely surprising that many of us are feeling increased anxiety and stress The one thing we can affect is our own attitude: we can all work on establishing a level of inner peace. *Jane Alexander*

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Without inner peace, outer peace is impossible. Only by creating peace within our own mind and helping others to do the same can we hope to achieve peace in this world. *Geshe Kelsang Gyatso*

World peace must develop from inner peace. Peace is not just mere absence of violence. Peace is, I think, the manifestation of human compassion. *Dalai Lama XIV*

Questions to Ponder

1. Growing up, what were your ideas and feelings and experiences about peace?
2. Think of a time when you witnessed someone help resolve a situation from conflict to peace. How did that happen?
3. Is there a place in our lives for righteous anger?
4. Ponder the idea of being “a person of right and wrong” and the certainty it provides. Is there a situation in which you feel strongly about being in the right, with your opponent in the wrong? What would the old Zen masters advise?
5. Can you imagine a world at peace? What would it be like?
6. How do you stand up to injustice with peace in your heart? How do you stand up with compassion to those who oppose your views?
7. Have you been able to foster peace within yourself or among others in your life? How have you done this?

Words of the Day

For the Gathering, think of a word or a phrase to complete this sentence:
I am “being peace” when I