

**First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA**  
**Sunday, September 21, 2014**

**Reading** *Dear Gandhi: Now What?*

The book was written as a series of letters by several of Gandhi's admirers who were members of the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action in Poulsbo, Washington:

Dear Gandhi,

What if you were alone with your grandmother and she were viciously attacked by a heavyweight boxer armed with brass knuckles? Would you remain nonviolent?

Sincerely,

Earnest Truth Seeker

Dear Earnest,

Following Grandmother's warning, I would pull her shag rug out from under the attacker's feet as he crosses the threshold. That would cause him to fall so that his chin would come to rest comfortably on the far side of the little pillow on which Grandmother rests her feet. The brass knuckles would fly through the air and land harmlessly in the kitchen sink. Grandmother and I would then offer our chagrined visitor tea.

If that doesn't work, Grandmother has other ideas.

Nonviolence demands creativity.

Gandhi<sup>1</sup>

Some of you may remember the scene in the movie *Gandhi* with Ben Kingsley where Gandhi is walking down a street in a rough neighborhood with his Anglican friend, Rev. Charlie Andrews. A group of young white ruffians decide to teach the brown-skinned Indian Khaffir and his white friend a lesson and they demand that Gandhi and Charlie step off the sidewalk. Charlie wants to high-tail it, but Gandhi gently reminds him of the Sermon on the Mount, which Andrews presumably knows well. Gandhi says, “The New Testament says to turn the other cheek, does it not?” “Well,” replies Charlie, “I think perhaps it was meant metaphorically.” “I’m not so sure,” replied Gandhi, “and I have thought about it a great deal. I suspect that Jesus meant that you must show courage, that you must be willing to take a blow, even several blows, to show you will not strike back, nor will you be turned aside; and when you do that, it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred for you decrease and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that, and I have seen it work.” In the event, the head bully is called up short by his mother and Gandhi and Charlie proceed on their way unharmed after a tense interchange.

That’s a little more sophisticated than the exchange of letters in *Dear Gandhi: Now What?* But the core of the message is the same. NOT resisting evil or even violence can defuse violence.

I love stories like this, and when I entered the ministry nine years ago, I considered myself a pacifist. Now I’m not so sure; but what I am sure of is that there are some things we know about hatred and war and peace whether we’re willing to condemn all wars or not, and that these insights can help guide us toward building peace everywhere we go.

Let’s start with my perhaps naïve commitment to pacifism.

I want to tell a few stories about the struggle against violence and war from our own traditions. We can trace the historical development of non-violent civil disobedience into the modern era through Henry David Thoreau, friend of our great Unitarian sage Ralph Waldo Emerson, who refused to pay a tax levied to support the Mexican War, a war to expand slavery. We can trace the development of non-violent resistance through Adin Ballou, founder of the utopian community in Hopedale, near Milford, MA. Ballou served as both a Unitarian and a Universalist minister, and he taught that turning the other cheek meant that Christians must not ever engage in violence no matter how righteous the cause. His doctrine of *Christian Non-Resistance*, as his most famous book is styled, led him to oppose the Civil War despite his own deep revulsion over and hatred of slavery.

Ballou's doctrine was discovered by Leo Tolstoy in Russia, who read *Christian Non-Resistance* and responded to it with his own defense of non-violence, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. When Gandhi went to London to study law, and later during his time in South Africa, his Christian friends pressed many books about Christianity upon him and urged him to convert, but Tolstoy's book was the only one that Gandhi felt contained the true teaching of Jesus, that you must not strike back, nor must you allow yourself to be turned aside.

John Haynes Holmes, long time Unitarian minister of the Community Church of New York, was a thoroughgoing pacifist during World War I, at a time when patriotic fervor swept the land and when every civic leader was expected to endorse and support the struggle. Holmes refused to allow recruitment centers, bond sales or even the

American flag in his church. He tried to prevent the General Assembly of Unitarians from endorsing the war, but he failed when William Howard Taft, then the moderator, delivered a bellicose speech demanding wholehearted support of the war by the Unitarian denomination.

In April of 1918, the board of the American Unitarian Association voted to deny financial support to any church whose minister was not a wholehearted and enthusiastic proponent of the war. Of the fifteen pacifist ministers of Unitarian churches at the start of the war, only seven remained in their pulpits by the end – among them Holmes.

Holmes had come to pacifism on his own, but he was reinforced in that commitment when he first learned about Gandhi's work in 1918; in 1921 he declared in a controversial sermon that Gandhi was "The Greatest Man in the World."

I've been reading Ken Follett's novel *The Fall of Giants*, which traces the path to war on both sides, and I have been forcibly reminded that Holmes was absolutely right to oppose that incredibly mad, destructive, and unnecessary war. When I was teaching U.S. History to 7<sup>th</sup> graders, I found it very difficult to explain to them why we got into that war; I suppose many of my students would have agreed with Bob Dylan's "With God on our Side:"

Oh the First World War, boys

It closed out its fate

The reason for fighting

I never got straight<sup>2</sup>

When I marched against the Vietnam War during my student years, I knew that our war, like World War I, was unjust, absurd and unnecessary. And, as we find ourselves today edging toward an alliance with Vietnam as a hedge against China, the war's absurdity and immorality become even more apparent.

I love telling these stories from our Unitarian Universalist history in sermons; but at the end of one of them, a member of Second Parish who was a veteran came up last on the receiving line and said, "You know how they say the lion will lay down with the lamb? The only trouble is, only the lion will get up! And what do you do about Hitler if you're a pacifist?"

What *do* you do about Hitler?

I love the ideal of non-violent resistance, and there are many situations in which it is far the better course. If I can appeal to the conscience of the other, there is a chance that I can indeed appeal to our common humanity and avoid doing evil.

But there are actually bad people in the world. There is actually evil in the world. There are people who would do us harm because they themselves are imbued with hatred, or because they are deeply committed to an ideology – Nazi racism, for example, or communist triumphalism – or, as we see more commonly today, they are deeply committed to totalist religions that demand the submission or destruction of all heretics and infidels.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and teacher in the Lutheran church of Germany who stood bravely against the Nazi attempts to subordinate the churches to the needs and wishes of Hitler. He was one of the leaders of the underground "Confessing

Church,” which refused to bow to the idol of der Fuhrer. He was a committed pacifist and was deeply committed to following the teaching of Jesus to “resist not evil.” Yet as World War II ground on relentlessly, he came to believe that only the assassination of Hitler could bring the evil to an end, and he participated in just such an assassination plot. Sometimes we have to choose the lesser evil, even if it does require violent resistance from us.

Criminals do need to be restrained. Prisons are sometimes necessary. *BUT* far too many non-violent offenders are incarcerated in this nation, and it is undermining the fabric of our most vulnerable communities. Too much constrain and too little constrain are both to be avoided. And it is clear that some nations and some movements that are out to destroy and to kill require restraint, even if we ourselves must use violent means to accomplish that.

So I’m no longer sure that pacifism and non-violent resistance are always and exclusively the answer for nations faced with imminent peril from implacable enemies. This is the conundrum President Obama wrestled with in his lecture upon receiving the Nobel Peace prize in 2009:

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.

I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands

here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there's nothing weak – nothing passive – nothing naïve – in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.

But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason....

So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths – that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly. Concretely, we must direct our effort to the task that President Kennedy called for long ago. "Let us focus," he said, "on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions." A gradual evolution of human institutions.<sup>3</sup>

So just as we in this congregation bind ourselves to a covenant that defines how we will be together:

To dwell together in peace,  
to speak the truth in love,  
and to help one another.

... so, too, can nations bind themselves to covenants that constrain the worst excesses of the violence of war. The first attempt to do this for the whole world was the Covenant of the League of Nations after the First World War, when the parties:

“In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security

by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war,

by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,

by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and

by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another,

Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.<sup>4</sup>

This covenant did not prevent the Second World War; but it did provide a template for the Charter of the United Nations, a new covenant among nations that so far has been one of the factors in preventing a Third World War – part of “a gradual evolution of human institutions,” as Kennedy put it.

So nations *can* choose to constrain themselves from the worst excesses of war. *And* they don't always honor those commitments.

But such covenants *do* show the possibilities of peace between nations when they are honored. It is possible to live in peace.

Non-violent resistance is a wonderful ideal. But it doesn't always work.



Thirdly, I have learned a few things that we know for sure about living in peace:

The Buddha was right when he said:

Hatred can never put an end to hatred; only love can. This is an ancient and unalterable law.

War breeds hatred.

So when war is absolutely necessary, it should be waged with as little violence toward non-combatants as possible. It is all too easy to “other” the enemy, to perceive everyone on the other side of a conflict as less than human, and to denigrate anyone who shares any part of their identity – to hate all Japanese or all Germans, all Muslims or all Jews, all Protestants or all Catholics (to hark back to the vicious European wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

Our first Unitarian Universalist principle commits us to affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person.” We may not treat any person – even violent people, even our enemies – as less than human. There are bad people in the world, but there are far more good people. When we behave justly, even when we have to fight, we must do our best to avoid treating everyone on the other side as our sworn enemy. The outrage at the atrocity of the bombing of London by the Germans still failed to prevent the Allies in World War II from committing their own even greater atrocities – the firebombing of Dresden and of Tokyo, and the ultimate atrocity, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even when enemies must be restrained, we need not ourselves descend into barbarism and so exacerbate the hatred. The collateral damage from the recent war in Gaza and from our own unrestrained use

of drones creates more enmity and makes peace harder. Indeed, it is not unheard of for enemies to provoke an attack on themselves in order to draw a disproportionate response that will recruit more support from their own potential allies, as did al Qaeda on 9/11, Hamas in the Gaza War, and most likely ISIS in the current conflict in Syria and Iraq. So even when we are faced with grave danger, restraint is in order. We must not respond to hatred with hatred, only with proportional force employed with as little anger as possible.

And of course we know that, as our responsive reading by Lao-Tse this morning put it, “If there is to be peace in the world, ... there must be peace in the heart.” When we are sure of our own commitment to peace even in the midst of war, when we believe with Abraham Lincoln that “right makes might,” we can respond to violence without becoming devoted to violence and to revenge.

Finally, reconciliation is possible. Nelson Mandela was able to emerge from twenty-seven years of imprisonment by the brutal South African Apartheid regime because he was at peace with himself. He realized that he must not respond in kind to the hatred of his enemies if there was ever to be peace in his nation. And so he was able to forgive. He was able to turn enemies into friends. He was able to lead a fraught but effective process of reconciliation, so that the violence and bloodshed that was to be expected in the face of over a century of vicious oppression was avoided. Even in response to violence, hatred is not inevitable. The Queen in our story this morning had it right: “The best way to get rid of your enemies is to make them your friends.” Winston

Churchill, no mean warmonger himself, put it this way near the end of his life: “To jaw-jaw is better than to war-war.”

War breeds war.

Violence begets violence.

Hatred begets hatred.

The world is an imperfect place, and in response to threats we should try whenever possible to apply the wisdom of our own and other traditions that counsels us to resist non-violently. When we have to fight, we must fight so as to minimize hatred. Peace begins in the heart, where each one of us has work to do, constantly remembering to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even our enemies; and reconciliation if possible despite past violence.

If we maintain these commitments, we can sing with Adin Ballou’s prophetic song from our hymnal,

Years are coming, speed them onward

When the sword shall gather rust,

And the helmet, lance, and falchion

Sleep at last in silent dust.

Amen, and may it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Douglass, Shelley Douglass & Bill Livermore, *Dear Gandhi: Now What? Letters from Ground Zero Gabriola Island, BC, Canada*: New Society Publishers, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/god-our-side>

<sup>3</sup> “A Just and Lasting Peace,” Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama, Oslo, 10 December 2009, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> Covenant of the League of Nations  
[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp)