

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Curiosity”
Sunday, May 26, 2019 10:30am – Memorial Day

Thought for Contemplation: The very first Memorial Day, the story goes, was originated by newly freed slaves in Charleston, SC, who gathered May 5, 1865, to express their gratitude to the Union soldiers who had perished in an open-air Confederate prison. - Michelle Richards, *UU World* 5/30/2011

Sermon “Beloved Memory” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Adin Ballou, author of the hymn “Years Are Coming,” was a Universalist and later a Unitarian minister who dedicated his life to non-violence. He believed that non-violence could be effective even in cases of extreme personal danger, or in opposing each and every war. Here are two examples from his pamphlet “Christian Non-Resistance in Extreme Cases:”

A few years since, a young man in the vicinity of Philadelphia was one evening stopped in a grove, with the demand, "Your money, or your life." The robber then presented a pistol to his breast. The young man, having a large sum of money, proceeded leisurely and calmly to hand it over to his enemy, at the same time setting before him the wickedness and peril of his career. The rebukes of the young man cut the robber to the heart. He became enraged, cocked his pistol, held it to the young man's head, and with an oath, said, "Stop that preaching, or I will blow out your brains." The young man calmly replied, "Friend, to save my money, I would not risk my life; but to save you from your evil course, I am willing to die. I shall not cease to plead with you." He then poured in the truth still more earnestly and kindly. Soon the pistol fell to the ground; the tears began to flow; and the robber was overcome. He handed the money all back with the remark, "I cannot rob a man of such principles."

.... [Leonard Fell, a Quaker,] was assaulted in a much more violent manner. The robber rushed upon him, dragged him from his horse, rifled his pockets, and threatened to blow out his brains on the spot, if he made the least resistance. This was the work of a moment. But Fell experienced no panic. His principles

raised him above the fear of man and of death. Though forbidden to speak, he calmly but resolutely reproofed the robber for his wickedness, warned him of the consequences of such a course of life, counseled him to reform, and assured him that while he forgave this wanton outrage on himself, he hoped for [the robbers's] own sake he would henceforth betake himself to an upright calling. His expostulation was so fearless, faithful and affectionate, that the robber was struck with compunction, delivered back his money and horse, and bade him go in peace. Then, with tears filling his eyes, he exclaimed, "May God have mercy on a sinful wretch," and hastened out of sight.¹

To broaden the context in the consideration of non-violence when danger to family and friends is involved, consider this lighter-hearted situation, from the book Dear Gandhi, Now What? by several of Gandhi's admirers:

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.

Gandhi²

Ballou and Gandhi are great exemplars of the struggle for peace in both personal and national contexts. Ballou served as both a Universalist and a Unitarian minister and founded the utopian industrial community in Hopedale, just about 35 miles northwest of us. His militant pacifist writings inspired Leo Tolstoy to write *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which in turn helped to shape Gandhi's non-violent resistance movements and thereby informed the practices of non-violence advocated by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the struggle for Civil Rights. Ballou's beliefs cast a long and hopeful shadow.

And yet we may wonder whether his blanket condemnation of war stood on firm moral ground when he opposed the Civil War. Would the slaves have been freed without that war? Granted, the initial purpose of the war was *not* to free the slaves but to save the Union. Ending slavery became a war aim only halfway through the war, and then as a means to winning the war as much as for the moral imperative of ending slavery. Nevertheless, as our Thought for Contemplation today notes, the very first Memorial Day was celebrated by the freed slave of Charleston, SC, on May 5, 1865, in gratitude for Union soldiers who had died for their freedom. However, the devastation of the war was unprecedented in its time and included scorched-earth policies like Sherman's March to the Sea that could not but embitter relations between the combatants for decades to come. The pervasiveness of death touched most families in the nation, so that it seems appropriate to refer to the war as creating a "Republic of

Suffering.” There are no good wars, but maybe there are still wars that do need to be fought. The same questions arise when considering World War II, of course. “What about Hitler?” is sobering question for pacifists to consider.

William Ellery Channing offered a more measured approach to the question of when wars may be justified:

I have said that the honor of a nation requires it to engage in a war for a wise end. I add, as a more important rule, that its dignity demands of it to engage in no conflict without a full consciousness of rectitude. It must not appeal to arms for doubtful rights. It must not think it enough to establish a probable claim. The true principle for a nation, as for an individual, is, that it will suffer rather than do wrong. It should prefer being injured to the hazard of doing injury....

But there is one more condition of an honorable war. A nation should engage in it with unfeigned sorrow. It should beseech the throne of grace with earnest supplication, that the dreadful office of destroying fellow-beings may not be imposed on it.³

I might refer to myself as a recovering pacifist: I wish I could believe that war is never necessary, and no war in my lifetime has been necessary, but I can imagine circumstances in which war might be necessary. In that case, I would hope with Channing that our nation “should engage in it with unfeigned sorrow.”

But it is the soldiers who die, or are broken, or are forever changed and often for the worse by the experience of war. Hundreds of thousands of our soldiers

have paid the ultimate price. Six hundred thousand died in the Civil War, fully two percent of the population. One hundred sixteen thousand died in the travesty of World War I, and twice as many were wounded. Four hundred sixteen thousand died in World War II, 2/3rds as many as in the Civil War, thirty-six thousand in the Korean War, 58,000 in the Vietnam War, and 6,800 so far in the wars that followed the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11.

But the devastation to the lives of soldiers extends well beyond those who gave their lives. Thirty-three percent of homeless males are veterans.⁴ The VA provides services to 112,000 veterans each year, and an additional 40,000 homeless veterans receive compensation or pension benefits each month.⁵ Twenty veterans commit suicide each day.⁶ “The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that PTSD afflicts: Almost 31 percent of Vietnam veterans. As many as 10 percent of Gulf War (Desert Storm) veterans. 11 percent of veterans of the war in Afghanistan.”⁷

It is altogether fitting and proper to acknowledge the service of our veterans and the suffering that war has brought upon them, and so Memorial Day is an opportunity to hold these sacrifices in our heart. Those of us who have marched against the war in Vietnam in my youth often conflated the injustice of the war with the shame of our veterans. We were wrong. Soldiers are never to blame for wars, be they just or unjust. It was all too easy for those of us who didn't have to fight for whatever reason to have contempt for those who did fight. We who

were privileged and who had ways and reasons not to be drafted – whether because of deferments for education or for reasons of mental or physical health whether real or concocted – we had no right to imagine that we were more righteous because we fought against the war in the streets while others fought the war in Vietnam.

Unitarian Universalists promoted resistance to the draft, burned draft cards, and engaged in resistance against the war in other ways as well, and they were right to do so. At the same time, though, there was less compassion than there should have been toward those who were compelled to fight because they lacked the privilege or the ability or the desire to resist the draft. I'm pleased that there are increasing numbers of Unitarian Universalist chaplains in the military, and the need and opportunity for UU chaplains will increase as more Americans identify themselves as "None" when asked to name their religious affiliation. A UU chaplaincy is one of the important ways in which we can acknowledge that whether war is justified or not, people will continue to serve in our military and need care both while and after they serve.

So what's a recovering pacifist to do? First of all, as Channing urged, evaluate every call for war with an extremely skeptical eye. Very few of the wars our nation has fought have been justified, and it's probably a good bet that any future wars are unlikely to be justified – so speaking out against war and struggling to bring an end to wars that are being fought will almost always be

honorable and righteous. We must provide care for those who serve in our military with chaplaincy and by other means, and especially for those who are veterans suffering from their service. We should comfort the friends and relatives of those who died in wars and take time to remember them. We must also advocate care for those in nations that have been defeated or otherwise decimated by war. The harsh exactions by the allies against the Germans after World War I were a significant contributor to the rise of Hitler, while the generosity of the Marshall Plan after World War II helped to usher in a period of peace and prosperity for both conquerors and conquered. We must always remember the words of the Buddha in the Dhammapada:

Victory breeds hatred;

The conquered dwell in sorrow and resentment.

They who give up all thought of victory or defeat,

May be calm and live happily at peace.

Let us remember all of those who have been caught up in the irrationality and violence of war, those who died and those who live on with blighted lives and all of those who have served. Whether the cause was noble or not, every person has inherent worth and dignity which is too easily ignored in the cauldron of war. All of those who fight are vulnerable to moral injury. Every person touched by war is a victim, and all of this suffering is a disruption of the beauty of the web

of life of which we are but a small part. Above all, let us work for peace, live in peace, be peace.

There is work to be done in our own hearts and minds. Work to be done in our communities. Work to be done in our nation. Work to be done to persuade our leaders to follow the way of Lao-Tse, who reminds us that:

If there is to be peace in the world,

There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations,

There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities,

There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors,

There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home,

There must be peace in the heart.

May it be so. Blessed be. And Amen

¹ Adin Ballou, "Christian Non-Resistance in extreme Cases," 1860, <http://www.adinballou.org/extreme.shtml>

² Jim and Shelley Douglass, *Dear Gandhi, Now What?* Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1988, p. 9.

³ Channing, *Collected Works*, pp. 662-663

⁴ <https://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/veterans.html>

⁵ http://nchv.org/index.php/news/media/background_and_statistics/

⁶ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_veteran_suicide

⁷ <https://medlineplus.gov/magazine/issues/winter09/articles/winter09pg10-14.html>