

On Peace--August 29, 2021
By Meganne Smith, UCF Worship Leader

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The sixth of our Seven UU Principles is this: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. The components of this principle--world community, peace, liberty, justice for all--could *each* be a topic to explore in depth. I have chosen to explore peace today.

One reason I chose to explore peace, is because, in just about a month, on September 21, it will be the day declared by the UN as International Day of Peace, or World Peace Day. It was started in 1981 "to provide a globally shared date for all humanity to commit to Peace above all differences and to contribute to building a Culture of Peace." For this occasion, I wanted to think about peace--what it means, what it looks like, how to obtain it, perhaps.

We could start our exploration of peace with standard definitions. Peace is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a state of tranquility, [especially] freedom from civil disturbance" and also peace is "freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions." All of these definitions point to peace as a state of being that is void of conflict.

However, what happens when life or the community cannot be void of conflict? And, since we could probably all agree that life or the community most likely cannot be void of conflict, does that mean peace can not ever actually exist?

The original Indo-European root from which we derive the modern word "peace" is *pac*. And *pac* meant "to join, to attach, to fasten, to stick, to agree or to settle." The Romans used this root word to form their word "pact," which is "a treaty or agreement between warring factions." These root meanings of "peace" are defined by infinitives, denoting actions. It is not the same as the idea of peace as a state of being void of conflict, but rather it is the idea that "peace" is an action that attempts to reach an agreement, or a state of equilibrium.

When I first found the definition of *pac* to mean "to attach" or "to fasten," it reminded me of what I have learned in yoga. Many yoga teachers will tell practitioners that the word "yoga" means "to yoke." Usually, yokes are used to join beasts of burden together to perform a work task. However, in yoga, the idea is to yoke the self to the divine; or some teachers will say that the goal is the union of one with the primordial soul or the union of one with All.

While the meaning of "yoga" might be hard to comprehend because it is rather abstract, still I think it is safe to glean that yoga, which is a practice that aims to bring peace to the practitioner--yoga requires action and this action is an attaching, a joining. It is, perhaps, a reconnecting to that which is peaceful, to that which is Peace itself. Through this cursory look at what yoga

teaches, I might conclude that peace is a state of being that humans have to work to return to. It is something we have to try to reattach to.

If, in my philosophy, it is difficult for humans to connect to peace within themselves, how much harder is it for us to maintain peace between us and other humans, between us and other living beings, between us and the Earth?

This is where I find it very helpful and even comforting to think of peace as the earnest work of attempting to make peace between two or more parties who are in conflict; I like to think of peace as the act of making agreements between those in the community.

On that line, I'd like to share with you parts of a sermon written by Susan Maginn, who is a UU minister serving the Navy Chaplain Corps. She writes about a particular conflict between rather particular groups, and hers is a message that is about social justice as well as peace. I will share large chunks of her message with you that I think shed light on our conversation of peace as an act of making peace.

Maginn says:

Imagine, if you will, that we are walking through a neighborhood and we see a simple house with a yard and a door and a window and a roof: just a simple house in a simple neighborhood. As we approach the house we walk down the sidewalk and we see that it is quite tidy and beautiful on the outside. We knock on the door and we are welcomed inside. We meet the kind and lovely people within. Our host shows us around the place. We see that the furnishings . . . [are] well-maintained and everyone we see seems happy and well cared for. As we are led toward the kitchen we walk by the back window and we see a large yard covered in nothing but trash. Whoa. What is going on here?

Onward on our tour of the house, our host takes us from room to room. Most of the rooms are beautiful and inviting. Then we are encouraged to hurry past one room at the end of the hall and as we peek through the doorway we see that there is a cluster of people huddled in the corner, clearly in pain, appearing as if they do not have enough food or clothing or healthcare or something. You are shocked. There are people in the house who are content, sitting at the dining room table relaxed, as if there is nothing amiss. . . .

Do we walk through the house politely smiling not even commenting on the trash in the yard because we don't want to offend our host? Do we walk through without looking through the doorway, without noticing that there are human beings suffering in the corner? . . .

Susan Maginn goes on to say:

. . . There was a call from Ferguson [Missouri] organizers for clergy of all stripes to preach on the text from the Hebrew prophetic tradition from Jeremiah 6:14 where the prophet declares:

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.”

The wound is there because there is no justice and the people who have been suffering in the corner are standing up and coming out. The people refuse to live hidden away in a negative peace, a peace of denial, a peace of submission, a peace of subjugation, a peace of silence, a peace of resignation, a peace of hopelessness, a peace of surrender, a peace of oppression.

Here’s Martin Luther King Jr.’s talking about this negative peace: “. . . I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. . . .”

And then Maginn concludes like this:

When I was in Ferguson, I stood among over a thousand people who chanted, “No Justice, No Peace. No Justice, No Peace.” . . . It was loud. I remember a woman kneeling next to the memorial [for Michael Brown] singing “Amazing Grace” and right behind me was a boom box playing the 70’s disco tune “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now . . . We’re on the Move!” People were talking and others were crying, some were laughing and others were praying. . . .

. . . All this beauty and all this horror blaring at us all at once. The tension. . . . The cacophony is the sound of churning hell into beloved community. . . . We need the tension.

. . . We are harmed. We cause harm. We are human. Meg Riley says “We are all a mix of stardust and broken glass.” And we treat the wounds carelessly saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” . . . Peace is being born from the tension. . . . Peace is being born through the black mothers who labor and scream: “Enough!” Enough of mistaking order for peace. Enough of saying peace, peace, when there is no peace. . . .

Let us wrestle until we are living on the right side of history, wrestle until we overcome, until we make hell into beloved community Let us be hungry for Peace and worthy of the blessing.

That is the end of Maginn’s sermon. While her sermon was clearly about structural racism in America, I think it can be expanded to include all forms of this tension between people in the community, even between people in the family. When there is injustice or other forms of conflict between people, there must be the tension of working, of wrestling to make hell into beloved community. It cannot be done by neutral or negative actions. It must be done by taking action-- again and again, if necessary. Even in our small community of UCF, we covenant to “forgive ourselves and each other and begin again and again in love.” We know that we will not always be at peace with ourselves and with the others in our congregation; yet, we covenant to work towards that peace again and again.

The UN, on this the 40th anniversary of the International Day of Peace, encourages us to take action, too. When they began the holiday in 1981, there was a focus on ceasefire, which seems like a non-action at first; however, in all honesty, ceasing to fire must be a deliberate action--probably one that is harder to undertake sometimes than firing. The UN this year, while still advocating for ceasefire, also states this year's theme as "recovering better for an equitable and sustainable world"; the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for 'a transformation of peace' by inviting people around the world to stand up against hatred and discrimination, to care for the planet, and to show global solidarity."

These are all verbs, all actions: stand, care, show; and these actions will not lead to peace immediately. If you stand up against hatred and discrimination, do you think peace will just materialize at that moment? If you care for the planet today, do you think that the planet will heal on the spot? If you show global solidarity today, do you think the world will be united and peaceful by the next dawn? Call me pessimistic, but I would say "no." There will be some tension we will have to go through.

Our world is not in a state of peace right now; but it is the perfect time to "peace out." I don't mean this in the usual way people use that expression. Usually, people will say "peace out" as they are saying goodbye to someone, or they will say "peace out" in order to say they don't want to be a part of something. I am saying it is the perfect time to do something that attempts to bring peace. I believe that our congregation's focus on anti-racism is an action of peace; we are planning and doing actions that work against structural racism in our community and in our state, perhaps even nationally. Our congregation, through the lead of our wonderful Building Team, is implementing green strategies in our new building that will help our environment. Our Pastoral Care Team listens to members and friends who are struggling with particular personal unpeaceful situations, and the Team works to help that person in the best ways they can.

Whatever it is you do or can do, I encourage you to peace out. Go out and try to make some peace. This talk reminds me of a talk I shared with you in January, called "staying with the trouble." There is order and chaos in this world at the same time. While we work for the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all, don't get discouraged. Your work towards peace is peace.

And also, it really begins to become clear to me, that our sixth UU principle was written with "peace, liberty and justice" lumped together because they require each other in certain ways. The principle reflects that peace is part of the work of liberty and justice; and liberty and justice help bring us into peace with each other and within ourselves.

In closing, I'd like to share the words of hymn #161 with you:

Peace! The perfect word is sounding, like a universal hymn
under oceans, over mountains, to the world's remotest rim.

Toiling centuries have struggled upward on a stony way
just to set the torch of freedom where it flames aloft today.

All the old forlorn lost causes, every fair forbidden dream,
and the prophet's hopeless vision, and the poet's fitting gleam,
All the hopes of subject peoples, all the dreams of the oppressed,
must be ours, our hopes, our visions. We can never stay or rest.