



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Peaceful Warrior,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 23, 2011

When I was a kid, I had a GI Joe action figure. My brother and I, and the other boys in our neighborhood, in addition to sports we played army games. We’d battle against the boys who lived at the other end of the street. We built forts and made dirt clods for throwing and used sticks as guns. When a new kid moved in the neighborhood, we rushed to recruit him before our enemy could. We were aggressive little boys.

The Harvard psychologist Samuel Osherson tells the story of how he and his wife tried to raise their son without this kind of violence. The didn’t let him have any toy weapons, because they didn’t want to encourage that kind of violent play. But one day, they were sitting together having breakfast, and their son ate the corner out of his piece of toast, until it was in an “L” shape. He picked it up and pointed it at his parents, and said, “Bang, bang, you’re dead!”

At this point the parents realized it was not going to be so simple as keeping their son away from toy guns. Maybe there was some inherent aggression in children, or in boys anyway, they needed to encourage in healthy ways, rather than try to suppress. What they did was buy a couple of swords. Osherson says that the good thing about sword fighting is that you can’t attack your opponent from a distance--you have to be close--and swordplay is more like a dance, it keeps you in relationship with your opponent.

Today I want to continue the conversation I began last Sunday about nonviolence. I’m not particularly worried about the virtual violence in our society, what you see in games and movies and toys. Every parent has to decide for themselves about that, but, as I like to tell my wife, I grew up playing soldier and fighting with my brother, and still, I’m a pretty peaceful guy. What concerns me is the real violence in our lives--in our relationships and in our culture. Particularly the way those who are seen as different or vulnerable get picked on: whether it’s bullying in school or the way politicians and pundits will target certain groups, making them the scapegoat for our country’s problems. When we pick on those who are vulnerable, this meanness is a sign our country’s soul is at risk. What happened to “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal”?

Some would say it’s our nature to do this, it’s the law of the jungle. But that’s not true. Look at the words by Gandhi I put at the top of the order of service today.¹ He’s right--it is the law of love that rules us, not

¹ Mahatma Gandhi: “It is the law of love that rules mankind. Had violence, i.e. hate, ruled us, we should have become extinct long ago. And yet the tragedy of it is that the so-called civilized people and nations conduct themselves as if the basis of society was violence.”

violence or hate. If we want to glorify those who are fighters, fine--but let's lift up those who are fighting for justice and peace.

My point today is that peace is not the same thing as passivity. You don't achieve peace without struggle, both inner and outer. Too often people calling for nonviolence and peace are mocked by their critics as naive, weak and cowardly. But this is a fundamental misunderstanding of nonviolence. Today I want to advocate for a way of living that takes courage and perseverance. That is the harder road to travel. But that is the way of life and liberation. I want to lift up the image of the peaceful warrior--the person who is committed to struggle against oppression, but who is not willing to diminish himself or herself by using the tactics of the oppressor, by sinking to that level.

At the start I have to confess to you that I am not the most courageous person. I don't go looking for a fight, and am happy to avoid conflict. Too often in my life I have kept quiet; have let an objectionable comment pass without protest, have failed to do the right thing because I didn't want to rock the boat. It's true that preachers often preach the sermons they themselves need to hear. I want to have more courage; to be a warrior for peace and for justice.

We need it these days, when our country seems to accept that the use of force, or the threat of it, is the answer to our problems. Legislators in New Hampshire just passed a law that allows concealed weapons into the state house. Some lawmakers said they'll feel more safe carrying a gun. I don't have anything against guns per se, and I think target shooting is a lot of fun. But guns are better kept safe at home, under lock and key.

On the national level, our foreign policy is inextricably linked to our military might. We spend as much on our military as the rest of the world combined, but does anyone even question this? Listen to one who did, who said:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

These words, spoken over fifty years ago, not by a bleeding heart liberal, but a Republican president, a general and war hero, Dwight Eisenhower. Can you imagine a politician saying them today? He would be vilified, called Un-American and weak on defense. But Ike was right--what kind of life is this for us and our children? If we as a nation are going to survive and thrive, we need to learn a new way. We need to lay down our weapons, our belief that might makes right, and find a better way to resolve our differences. What good we could do, if we would heed the prophet's call to turn our swords into ploughshares.

This week I've been reading Mahatma Gandhi, the man who first brought nonviolent action to use on a large scale. Gandhi's genius was in his use of soul force; how he brought together the spiritual wisdom of East and West and used it in the struggle against oppression and division.

Gandhi understood that violence is actually an expression of weakness. Anyone can respond with anger, can use the weapons they have at their disposal, when they feel threatened, offended, afraid. It takes strength and courage to not strike back, Gandhi wrote, “Nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice, but is the supreme virtue of the brave... Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with nonviolence.”

Think about it. When you’ve been attacked, what takes more strength and courage? To strike back, or to resist that urge? You have to be mighty strong to turn the other cheek.

The Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg tells her students, “Sit like a mountain. Sit with a sense of strength and dignity... No matter how many winds are blowing, no matter how many clouds are swirling, no matter how many lions are prowling, be intimate with everything and sit like a mountain.”

How would our world be different if we could do this, as individuals, as communities, as a nation? What if our country had responded to the events of September 11, 2001, not with bombs but with an increased effort to understand the roots of violence and a new desire to work for justice? How might your life be different if, when someone attacks or offends you, you could take a deep breath and resist that urge to strike back or get even?

It’s not easy. It takes practice, and self-discipline and depth of soul, to respond with love instead of hate. And it’s worth it. It’s liberating when you’re not controlled by another’s actions; no longer a prisoner of your own emotions.

If you are ready to try walking more peacefully on the earth, don’t go it alone. The way is too difficult. We need one another for help and companionship. We need the wisdom of those who have traveled this path before. Those companions and guides are available to us. Two of them provided our readings² this morning. Joan Chittister is a member of the Benedictines, the Catholic religious order. Thich Naht Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. What they, and others who have walked this path, from Jesus to Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr., all know is that it begins in here--with a transformation in your heart.

Most of these great warriors for peace have been deeply rooted in a spiritual tradition. This makes sense to me. You need to be doing your own soul work if you want to work for peace. You need to be in touch not only with your light, but with your shadow--your own anger, fear, prejudice and vulnerability--if you are going to cultivate the heart you need for this work.

In every age there are those who have lived with great courage, and greater love. Who have loved their neighbor, who have been willing to put their lives on the line for peace and justice, who have known the liberation that comes from living for something larger than yourself.

We may not be called to make the sacrifices some of them did. But their lives, the lives of countless women and men who struggled against great odds with only soul force on their side, they call out to us. They challenge us, and they inspire us, to do something with these lives we have been given.

² The readings were from Thich Nhat Hanh, “Ahimsa: The Path of Harmlessness,” in *Love and Action* and Joan Chittister, “When Love is Stronger than Death: Making Peace One Heart at a Time,” in *Getting On Message*, Peter Laarman, editor.

“Nonviolence can not be preached,” Gandhi said. “It has to be practiced.” My words, and your words, mean nothing if we don’t put them into action. If we don’t walk our talk. So I ask you: how are you going to bring more peace, and more understanding, to this world? What will you do to be an instrument of peace?

I leave you with these words by Thich Naht Hanh:³

Take my hand.
We will walk.
We will only walk.
We will enjoy our walk
without thinking of arriving anywhere.
Walk peacefully.
Walk happily.
Our walk is a peace walk.
Our walk is a happiness walk.

Then we learn
that there is no peace walk;
that peace is the walk;
that there is no happiness walk;
that happiness is the walk.
We walk for ourselves.
We walk for everyone
always hand in hand.

Walk and touch peace every moment.
Walk and touch happiness every moment.
Each step brings a fresh breeze.
Each step makes a flower bloom under our feet.
Kiss the Earth with your feet.
Print on Earth your love and happiness.

Earth will be safe
when we feel in us enough safety.

Amen.

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, “Walking Meditation.”